The Black Cat

A Short Story Magazine

January, 1916 — Ten Cents

The Price of A Banjo

by J. Bernard Lynch

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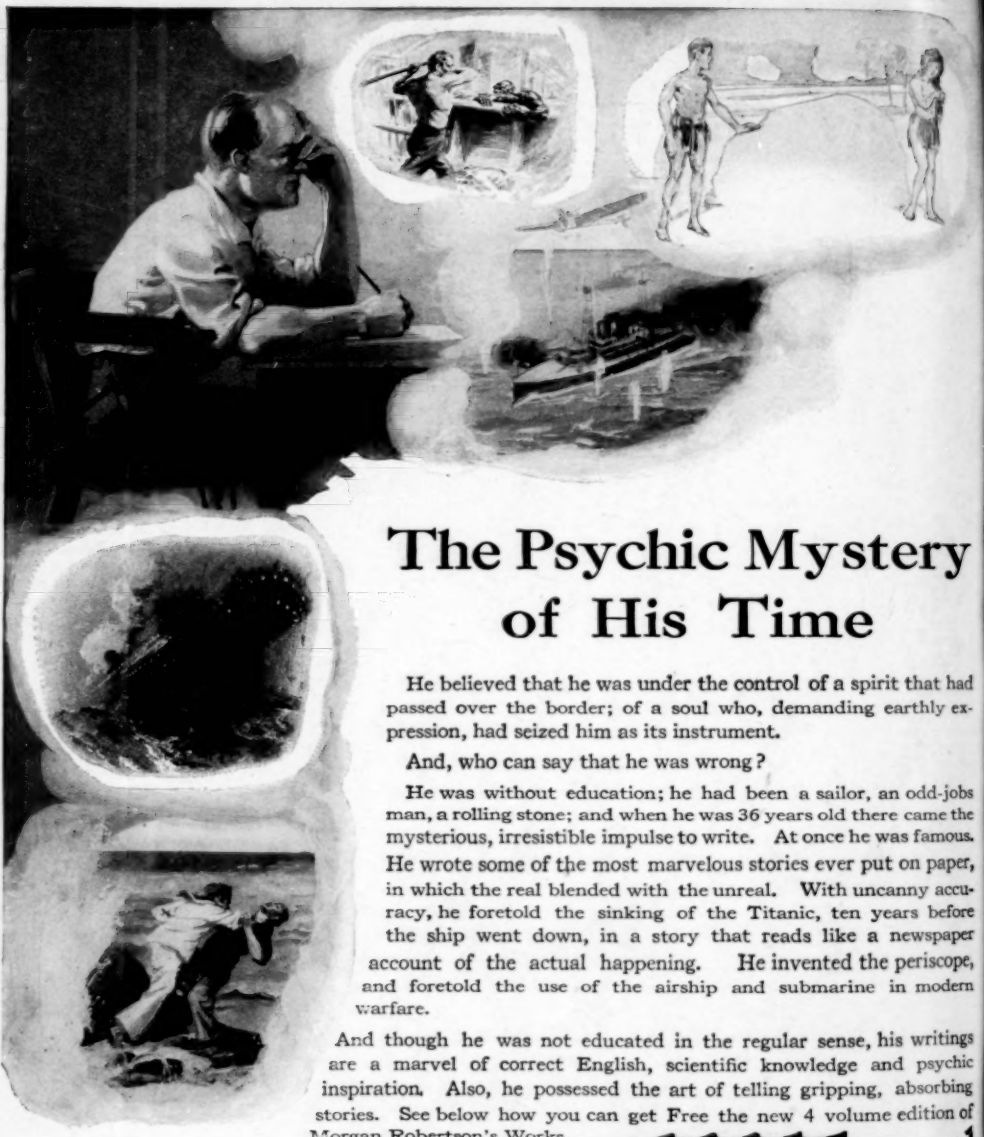

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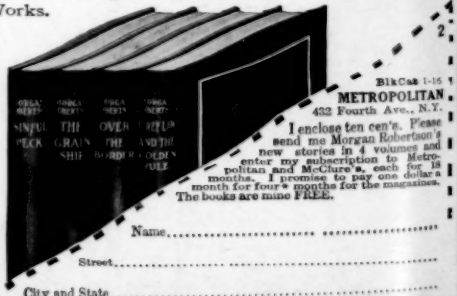

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The Black Cat

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WILSON

If a man does not provide for his children, if he does not provide for all those dependent upon him, then he has not opened his eyes to any adequate conception of human life.

The Price of a Banjo

BY J. BERNARD LYNCH

THREE golden balls glisten under a sputtering arc light. On the glass of the double doors gilded information, "Money to Loan." Tier upon tier of clothing hug the near-white walls on either side. Some are young in length of sacrifice, others dustladen, hang listlessly under gray shrouds like ghosts long held in bondage. From be-filmed shelves that aspire to the once spotless ceiling of limed coating peek hat boxes and a motley collection of stringed bundles, collateral passed to the ledger of forgotten possessions.

A short counter extends to a glass case showing more evidence of ballast abandoned by despair; hard by, a cage, also glass, opens in businesslike manner under the words, "Money Loaned Here," plainly painted for guidance to the uninitiated.

A man and a girl are entering. The licensed keeper of the place leaves the glass cage expectantly and across the show case sends the smile he keeps for those who wish to leave money, not to carry it away. He could not tell you how he spotted them for buyers, but his craftiness was, as always, successful. It was only curiosity that sent the heavy eyebrows up to the lined forehead.

The man, an elderly fifty in movement, a youthful forty-five in figure, stuttered, raised his hat nervously, and disclosed hair of gray; these whitened locks alone unobscured by coal dust. For the rest, his eyes looked out as from a smudgy sketch in softest black crayon; his clothing exuded a cloud of dust, which lay in ridges on the wrinkles of his wrists, the lobes of his ears, on his very lashes.

After a moment of perturbed silence he swallowed hard, replaced his hat, and looked toward the girl.

"My daughter," he said, with an explanatory nod, as if making a revelation that circumstances enforced.

The pawnbroker acquiesced, and instantly decided she was not his daughter.

"I want to get her a suit."

With a gesture that he meant should convey confidence, the pawnbroker leaned across the glass case, glad of an opportunity for closer scrutiny of the girl.

Slim and shapely, eyes brown, black hair, symmetrical features, white, even teeth, hair clipped short, about seventeen—such would her description have appeared in the police report if the pawnbroker had made her a loan.

"I haven't anything very attractive in ladies' wearing apparel line," he began, wondering inwardly if this blackamoor was planning to deck the girl in white satin and orange blossoms, a kind of costume often hired in that neighborhood.

"I mean—coat and trousers!" ex-

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claimed the self-confessed father.

The pawnbroker muttered "Oh!" and viewed the girl's trim figure critically. She seemed to feel none of the embarrassment that was making the interview so obviously distressing to the man. One might imagine he was blushing under the coal dust, but a merry smile hovered in the corners of her pretty mouth and one of the brown eyes unmistakably winked at the pawnbroker. This finished his befuddlement, and he swept his stock with a hopeless stare.

"I—I can make a guess on the trousers," he finally offered.

The girl laughed. "Well, hurry up and make it," she cried in accents of the most unabashed sweetness. The purchase might have been one of a mouth organ or a mousetrap for all the embarrassment she showed.

The pawnbroker moved to a pile of new clothing. At the same time the girl nudged the man, and thus reminded of duty, he cleared his throat and exclaimed in husky shame, "A second hand pair will have to do."

The keeper turned to another counter on which reposed a varied collection of nether garments marked "expired loans." His fingers ran down the labels of waist and leg measurement, and drew out a pair, dark colored, from the centre.

"Perhaps these will do."

The man gave them a most casual glance, as of one hating the whole business, and passed them to the girl. She frowned upward, and once more, reminded of his duty, he spoke, asking, "Have you a room where they may be tried on?"

"In the back," motioned the keeper. The girl tripped lightly away, humming a little tune, gay as Aurora about to deck herself in an extra pink cloud. Somehow both men breathed more freely when she had left them, but in a moment the coal dusted one felt it incumbent to essay an explanation, which he did awkwardly, observing, "This may seem a bit unusual."

"Not at all," returned the pawnbroker, as of a profession the first ethics of which are never to show surprise.

"Oh, but I think it must be. The fact is," he continued, with a confidence evidently forced, "my daughter is to take the part of a boy in an amateur theatrical performance, and she wanted me to come along with her so she could get fitted out."

The pawnbroker bowed in understanding, the while saying to himself, "You're letter perfect in repeating the story you made up before coming here, but it won't go down with me. Neither of you is up to the amateur theatrical society level." And he gave a half unconscious, thoroughly quizzical glance at the obscuring coal dust. Whereat the man tried to explain that, too. "I'm employed till 7 P. M.," he said, "so we had to make it a night shopping trip."

"Employed," quoted the pawnbroker, still talking to his inner consciousness. "That ain't so much of a word, but I don't believe it's in the ordinary coal heaver's repertoire." He tried to study the face of the man before him, but it was inscrutable, the coal dust acting as a mask. "Hullo," he added, aloud, "here's our young friend."

The girl emerged from the back

room, an amused grimace on her pretty countenance. "You better guess again," she said with gay sauciness to the pawnbroker.

She had donned the trousers over her skirts, and even thus worn they overlapped at the waist and dragged at the heels.

"They—they seem a trifle large," apologized the pawnbroker, "and—" his eyes travelling to the diminutive shoes, "rather too long."

"I should say so!" She was crisp of speech now, and seemed to have forgotten the parent in the background. "Do take the measurements in the regular way. You know we can't stay around making guesses all the evening."

In dumb obedience the pawnbroker obeyed, equipped the damsel again, and on her next—very prompt—reappearance, she announced herself well pleased. A coat and a soft hat were next picked out, and then the girl retired once more, saying she wished the aid of the big mirror in giving her the effect of the entire outfit.

The pawnbroker, interested despite his determination to meet all life's little amazements with a blasè air, looked toward the other man and wished he would speak. The coal heaver had half turned and seemed to be gazing, with an intentness not even dust-shrouded lashes could hide, at something hanging on the wall. Working his fingers nervously, as if itching to get his hands on the object, he advanced slowly, in seeming fascination.

The pawnbroker turned to see which of the thousand "pledges" was located directly above his own head. It was a banjo.

"May I see that—one moment—please!" The voice, hitherto heard only in tones of shy embarrassment, now vibrated with passionate entreaty.

"Certainly," gasped the pawnbroker, and handed it over.

The man gave one look—a look of experience—and asked, "How much?"

"Nine dollars—it originally sold for seventy-five. It's a rare one of its kind."

The man's eyes expressed glorious reminiscences as he fondled the banjo affectionately. "Only nine dollars," he whispered. "I—I may be able to buy it later." Then he was galvanized into sudden action. "Take it, hang it up, quick!" he exclaimed, thrusting the instrument over the counter. The girl had reappeared, with the coat and trousers hung over her arm, and twirling the hat on her finger. Rapidly she took in the group, and frowned upon the banjo. "Oh, papa!" she cried reproachfully. To the other's amazement, the man seemed to cringe at this childish scorn; he slunk into the background, and only came forward once more, when the suit was wrapped up, together with the shirt, collar, tie and socks, which finished the masculine equipment. This was to pay the very modest bill, which, the keeper noticed, took all but the last dollar in the worn wallet that still betrayed a little of its old-time elegance, as real pigskin. The odd couple moved toward the door, and the pawnbroker sank into his glass cage with his mind fully made up on two points—"papa" was prob-

ably not a father, and "daughter" was probably not a girl. The brisk, merry way of treating the adventure was thoroughly boyish and the clipped hair added to the impression.

"Girls who play boys in shows don't sacrifice their long tresses," reflected the pawnbroker. "They tuck them under a cap, or beneath a wig. I heard of an actor once who blackened himself all over to play Othello, but that was the exception; proving too close application to detail isn't the rule."

The door opened, and the couple re-entered the shop. The younger one was laughing and holding both hands to her ears.

"I forgot the ear-ring holes," she confessed, looking sweetly into the perplexed face of the pawnbroker. "They are sure to show. What can I do about them?"

"I don't think," began the pawnbroker, "they will be noticeable over the footlights."

He made the remark with malice aforethought, and noted both had apparently forgotten the amateur theatrical ruse. The girl stood nonplussed, then spoke again.

"And I'm sure they will be," she said, decisively. "You see—it's very important no one should know me."

The pawnbroker pressed his point no longer. "A little grease paint or cosmetic," he suggested, "would fill them effectually."

She thanked him and called out a pleasant "Good night," as she left for the second time. The man had not spoken; he had only stood and looked at the banjo.

With a sigh at leaving this interesting continued story at a crisis, and by no means sure of being able to secure the next instalment, the pawnbroker resumed his addition of loaned sums with accrued interest. The final interview completed his puzzlement. If girls didn't usually cut their hair for casual occasions, boys seldom had pierced ears. Mystery would cling about that couple.

Three days later the pawnbroker went forth from the restaurant where he took his mid-day meal, turning up his coat collar and quickening his pace to the better and the sooner avoid the blustering wind, that brought more than a hint of impending snow. Within a block of the shop he recognized his previous customer. The man was enveloped in a huge, shabby coat, and the grime of coal still obscured his face. As the pawnbroker's mind framed a questioning thought about the whereabouts of the other, it was answered by a glance ahead.

The girl, now attired in boy's clothing, stalked some twenty feet in advance. She was without an overcoat, and carried a large bundle under her arm.

Trailing along, the pawnbroker saw she turned toward his shop, tried the door, and stopped to read the card on which he had announced the time of his return. The coal-crusted man, after a nervous glance up and down the street, joined her. The pawnbroker lost no time in unlocking the door and getting to his place behind the counter.

"We called to ask you to do us a favor," began the man, taking the bundle.

"Certainly," observed the keeper,

preparing to cut the string, and supposing it was their object to put the contents of the parcel in pawn. To his surprise the girl jumped forward and laid a detaining hand upon his. "Please—please don't open that," she begged. "We just want to ask you to keep it safe for a little while. We may want it in a hurry."

The girl's face, wan and blue with cold, expressed deep and sincere appeal. Her small hands, ungloved, were red and swollen from exposure. Her shiver was eloquent, as she moved a bit nearer to the furnace register in the floor.

A feeling of resentment stirred within the pawnbroker. His eyes traveled to meet those of the other man.

"Look here," he began, indignantly, "that girl may show the fortitude of a martyr, but it don't seem to me right to make her travel through the streets in a thin hand-me-down suit worn threadbare by the original owner, on a day like this. She should have a warm overcoat, and that thought isn't a business inspiration on my part, either. She's chilled through right now. I don't know what's in this mysterious bundle, or whether it's worth thirty cents, but I advise you to hock the contents for what they'll bring, and get the girl a Benny. Pick out some easy slob of a pawnbroker, who'll do the business for what you can afford. For instance, yours truly." And he ended with a smile of invitation that robbed his harsh words of half their bitterness.

The man bit his lip and swallowed hard, but the girl was still ready to parley. Indeed, the man forced her to the front by an appealing look to which she returned a reassuring nod.

"It's good of you," she said, "to make that offer, but you see, we can't possibly accept it."

"Why not?"

"As I told you before, we will probably need the contents of that bundle in the greatest hurry. And we might—might not have the sum to redeem it."

"Then why not keep it with you?"

"There are—there are reasons! I am about to go away, and papa will give up his room, and sleep where he is employed."

"In a coal bunker," interposed the man.

The pawnbroker abruptly placed the bundle on a shelf apart from the numerous pledges.

"It will stay there until called for," he remarked. "Don't worry. At the same time, I must say you're playing a dangerous game. A law on our statute books forbids this thing you're doing. A girl masquerading as a boy commits a grave offence; she is liable to arrest. And you, sir, would probably be detained as accessory."

Perhaps they were hardened criminals—at any rate, this peroration affected them not at all, though he noticed neither made any further reference to the "amateur theatricals" story. Finally the man spoke.

"I admit we are doing something unusual," he said, "but circumstances justify the act—from our point of view. I did not need your words to remind me that my girl was suffering from cold. However, she will soon be beyond the reach of hardship and

humiliation. Thank you for storing the parcel. Good day!"

They were gone before the pawnbroker could speak in response. He hurried to the door, but saw no trace of them in the passing crowd. Somehow he shivered when he recalled the tone used in uttering those words: "She will soon be beyond the reach of hardship and humiliation."

Days lengthened to weeks and every time the pawnbroker turned to look at the parcel on the shelf he found the curiosity-germ still alive. Finally it wearied of feeding on crumbs of circumstance, and craved more sustaining solids. He reached for the bundle, as though that were a book which was bound to reveal the sought for intelligence. The package contained only the girl's apparel, two sets of worn and unskilfully patched underclothing, and the outer garments worn on the first visit to the store. From his viewpoint these rather increased the mystery. The things were to have been required "in a great hurry," showing a probable need of the "boy" to be once more metamorphosed as to sex. But they had not been needed. Was the "boy" still wearing the hand-me-downs, or might there be an explanation more grim and disquieting?

It was now late winter. The cold promised on that November afternoon when he had seen the girl shivering in the street, now held the city in an iron grip. The man replaced the bundle and drew a chair to the register. "There's something chilling about unexplained mysteries," he reflected, "especially when they're forced on you." He stuffed cut plug into his calabash and smoked thoughtfully. "I can't forget that shivering creature. The memory sticks in my crop like a bad debt. Now if I could get positive information they were a couple of crooks I would forget 'em overnight, but the girl was too merry, in spite of her hungry dog look, to be a real bad one. And the man—"

The pawnbroker turned and gazed over his own counter. The banjo continued to hang on the wall. Once or twice he might have sold it, by shading the price a trifle, but he had persistently refused. "I told the poor cuss nine dollars," he would think, "and at nine dollars it shall remain. Perhaps with a shading he might have hoped to secure it. I can keep straight even if I'm only the uncle of the down and out."

He would have hidden the banjo, so anxious had he become not to sell it, only for fear that the man might pass by, and not come in because it was missing from the wall. He had tested its being visible through the street door, and found that it was, from one certain angle.

He looked up and out now, and then jumped to his feet. A face was peering in—a face he thought he knew, though washed clean of coal dust. He made one step to the door and caught the other by the shoulder.

"Come in, come along in," he gasped. "It's cold out there. Come along in and warm up. You see I've still got it."

He pointed to the bundle, but the other had eyes only for the banjo.

"Do you mind taking it down again?" was the question asked pleadingly, as once before.

The pawnbroker handed it over, and resumed his seat. The visitor had sunk unasked into the second arm chair. From his face the lines of misery and want faded while he handled the instrument understandingly. Tightening the strings he tapped the drum lightly. A glow of happiness came into his pathetic face as his nimble fingers picked out a dainty melody. The pawnbroker, who had presumed all banjo music was of the "chickens pecking corn from a tin pan" sort, sat astounded. After playing a few moments the man stopped, like one detected in a crime, and laid the banjo tenderly across his knees. "It has a heart," he said simply.

The pawnbroker thought he was right. The two sat on in silence, while outside the air filled with snowflakes. Then the pawnbroker saw that he was being made an object of silent scrutiny. He tried to express kindly interest in a glance—perhaps succeeded. At any rate, the other spoke.

"My name isn't Smith," he began abruptly, then stopped. Five minutes passed before he again trusted himself to the seeming oasis of sympathy in an arid desert of indifference. Then he said, "That girl was my daughter. You doubted. Don't deny it. Not to have doubted would be making yourself out a fool. Do you want my story? I give warning it's teeming with sentiment—the sort of stuff that's abhorred in business life and a drug in fiction. I see you nod. Very well, I'll go on.

"Twenty years ago I fell in love, a common occurrence, and one that generally adds to a man's happiness, if it's with the right girl. My sweetheart seemed to me everything desirable—sweet, beautiful, trusting, faithful, anxious to make any sacrifice for affection. The affair had all the attributes of romance, including the obdurate father. Perhaps his obduracy was what drove the girl to me. Her mother was long dead, and hers was a home to encourage heart hunger. Her father had money, but he was hard as any ore ever mined from the ground as basis for his stocks and bonds.

"I was an artist—at least I thought I was. My chosen instrument was—you have guessed it!—the banjo. It probably seems an odd choice, to select an instrument used only for syncophated effects and meretricious tunes. It was my fancy to think I could give this despised object its proper place in the musical world. I felt convinced it had a heart, and mine was to be the reward that would justly come from its discovery. My sweetheart seemed to believe as I did. During our three months of courtship my banjo and her song were the vehicles on which we rode in dreamy happiness to the heights.

"Of course, with such a father, we had to meet secretly. Being betrayed, I was forbidden the house, and she was told that marriage with me would mean the usual thing—being disowned in life, disinherited at death. Poor foolish little girl! I believe she retorted that I was a genius. She thought I was. I thought so too. Perhaps I think so now. We did not know that genius and hunger stalk ofttimes together. We learned af-

terwards that a man may truthfully be called a genius, and still be unable to earn a living. I can vouch for this, for I was soon proven that kind of a genius.

"We were married, but there was no relenting parent when we presented ourselves for forgiveness. I shall never forget his words. 'You have chosen a minstrel man,' he said in a tone of flint, 'and you will abide by the consequences.' A minstrel man! In those mocking words were born her first distrust of me. I think from that moment she began to doubt my artistry, and question if I were indeed only a 'minstrel man'!

"I went my way in the confidence of youth, my face toward the sun, the joy of love satisfied in my heart. I had some little money; we lived upon it, and laid great plans for the future, when I should be world renowned. Still it was hard for her to understand that more must be spent in my studies than for her modest housekeeping. I intended to compose for my chosen instrument, as well as to transpose great compositions for it, to make it accepted in places where it had been despised and rejected. I was busy all day and half the night with my thorough bass, my practising, my great dreams. She was often lonely. Our slender means precluded entertaining; if she went to see her girl friends they told her her father had bought another steam yacht, and it was too bad she had married 'a minstrel man'! And had her husband an engagement yet?

"After three years a girl and a boy were born, twins. We named them Grace and George. For a fortnight the mother hovered on the brink of another world. I sent word to her father, but no effort could induce him to see her.

"And now our comparative misery became active poverty. I ventured the last of my money in publishing, and by the dishonesty of others lost even the fame that was due me. Substantialities dwindled to crumbs; even these were nibbled in fear of their falling off. I was obliged to give up my dreams, and turn to hard realities. My wife thought I could teach, but alas, my studies had formed a result which it was impossible to impart. A few pupils came, found me 'impractical,' and went to others who gave them tunes in six lessons. She believed me obstinate—or stupid. She could not understand that the theory I had been a lifetime acquiring was not to be passed, in half a dozen interviews, to the casual learner. I became a clerk in a music store, and lost the place because I could not count money correctly. And why should I count coins rightly? I had never been trained in such work. Enough of this. We did not starve, but we suffered every possible loss of pride and even self-respect. I was capable, it seemed, of only the roughest work, the sort that employs the hands only. My wife never sought her girlhood friends now. Her husband was below even a 'minstrel man.'

"When the kiddies were ten years old she fell ill. It was a tedious, nervous trouble which she had, and a leading symptom was her hatred of all forms of music. Grace promised to have a pretty voice, but it was now hushed as something contraband. I

had begun to pluck up a bit of courage about that time. One or two people of prominence had become interested in my theory, and while unable to help me except by words, had urged me to work in my spare hours, and prepare for possible presentation of my ideas at a musical convention. This had to stop. The sight of a banjo drove my wife frantic. She imbued the poor instrument with power to have caused all our misfortunes. All night she would rave, imploring me to sell the collection of banjos which I had so far kept through everything.

"Constant dropping of water wears away the stone; I finally did as she wished. I knew she was not long for the world. It was perhaps a trifle compared with the lifelong sorrow I had brought her. I applied to the men who had befriended me; they said they knew exactly the place where my collection was wanted. A wealthy connoisseur would take them all, and pay a good price. I was pleased, for the instruments had been so long associated together, that I could not bear to think of their drifting apart. Besides, I had hope of some time winning them back. I could not know that the mother had worked upon my children until a banjo had become, in my household, what a whiskey bottle is in others—the emblem of all evil. Well, the sale was made, the check of the 'wealthy connoisseur' forwarded to me. I looked idly at the signature.

"It was that of her father!"

The man's breath came in a labored gasp, as he paused and leaned toward the pawnbroker.

"You hear? It was her father!"

He rose, a fierce light flashing from his eyes, his rough hands gripping the banjo. His face was drawn tense, and the veins bulged blue on his temples.

"Damn him!" he snarled. "He broke them up! And sent me word he had done it!"

He glared from the window, as the storm of memory lashed and spent its fury. Finally he turned to the pawnbroker and started as if his listener's presence had been forgotten. Then his body crumpled back in the chair, and his head dropped to his chest, while tears trailed over his cheeks.

The ticking of many clocks left in pawn broke loudly on the impressive silence.

"She died," he resumed, in a sort of drone, as if repeating a story grown monotonous in the telling. "When we laid her away her father came and stood unmoved. There was no sign that he recognized death, but by his uncovered head. If he suffered, that suffering was hidden under a sphinx-like exterior. He did not speak to me or to Grace, but he took a little notice of George, asking the lad his name, and his standing at school.

"The years dragged on. I continued to learn the things I did not want to know. The children were dear to me, but we had little in common. They revered the memory of their mother, and felt firmly convinced that I had treated her with cruelty. Any attempt on my part to resume interest in music caused terrible quarrels. Had it not been so grim, it would have been funny, the way

those youngsters would drag me by a music shop, as a drunkard's child steers his father past the bar-room.

"The grandfather had seemingly forgotten the children lived.

"I began to feel I was growing old. Now the hand of time may accentuate the lines of care, silver the locks, bend the frame, rob us of elasticity in step, but its harshness is not felt if the touch is softened by the joy of other gifts. To some may come a contentment that is peace itself, as they glance backward over the weary way. Time has but given them a keener and a kindlier insight into things that were. A soft glow of warmth replaces the flame of a bitter spirit, all things past and present shine in a mellow radience.

"And no one has lived so as to enjoy the gloaming who has not suffered. Of that I am convinced. I had suffered—God knows how deeply! But my memories were still bitter. For no success had crowned any of my efforts. I had failed my art, and yet giving that up had brought no pleasure to my wife. I sacrificed every inclination for my children, yet saw they were coming to view me only as a failure.

"A year ago George, with my consent, joined the navy. It gave him a chance to work out his own problems, unhampered by me. He is ambitious and practical. I do not fear for him. Grace and I were left together. My work was just then of the roughest character, and so poorly paid that we were glad of George's absence.

"At this time the old man made a sign. One evening, when Grace was asleep, I had a caller—her grandfather's secretary, who was a good fellow. He said his employer was ill, probably his last illness. The secretary had ventured to direct his mind toward a possible disposal of his earthly affairs. The old man at length consented that George should be sent for. He remembered the bright boy at his mother's grave. I realized with a pang that George was far beyond our reach, and might suffer for a lifetime because of his absence. A hint as to George's sister brought out the secretary's full story. The old man had become a woman hater. Indeed, I think he began to drift that way twenty years ago, when his daughter deserted his home for a husband's. For many years he had admitted only men servants to his house, and sought society only in clubs of men. In his sickness he was tended by male nurses. He would read only books written by men, and actually had his windows arranged so he might not see women passing along the street. The secretary added, as a final fantastic touch, that he had wilfully chosen a place of residence near a huge foundry where the work was done by males, and fumed at the mouth when he heard girl stenographers had been hired.

"The secretary went away, promising to call again, and the next day I told Grace of our predicament. You see it all, now! The bright little creature insisted on taking the part of her twin, and going to see the sphinx. We thought, at first, it would be only a matter of a few visits, and so it was, for three days. Then the grandfather, who took a

sick man's fancy to the seeming lad, insisted 'he' should come to live with him. That was when we left the bundle in your care. We had sent word to George to secure a furlough, if possible, and to hasten home. With his arrival Grace would want to resume her girlish personality, perhaps in a hurry. I dared not have the clothes in my possession, for the bundle was sure to be examined in the coal bunkers, where my employer let me put a cot. Grace could not have them with her, for a similar fear. I gave up my room in order to save every possible cent, as it might be necessary to pay George's travelling expenses from some far distant port."

"Well?" asked the pawnbroker, as the story seemed to stop short.

"George has come home. He has come to a noble inheritance—an inheritance earned by his sister.

"The old man died with his granddaughter's hand in his, thinking it that of his grandson. He softened; he changed from a sphinx to common clay; his heart responded to human emotion. It was all the influence of that merry girl, whose posing as a boy would perhaps have deceived none but a sick man. We early took the secretary into our confidence. He declared there was no wrong, either legal or moral, in the deception. With the melting of those bonds attaching the old man to life, came a further melting of bitterness. Grace was able to win his love for herself, in the person of her brother; she was further able to present her own claims, as those of a sister. The old man did not ask to see his granddaughter, but he signed a will making equal division of his property between the two. Life, for them, is now showing its fairest face. For me—"

He raised the banjo tenderly into position and then a melody sprang forth, sprightly, joyous, tender, reminiscent. As he played the pawnbroker forgot his moth balls and his usury; he viewed a scene where lights shone dimly, a soft glow only disclosing a wharf on the edge of a moonlit, Southern river. Seated on a bale of cotton a youth raised his voice in the ardor of love. Out beyond the coming trip he glimpsed a sweetheart and a reward. And then the scene changed to a field spangled with flowers. Through it ran a road, beckoning and luring one to a brook, where mossy banks were fragrant with sweet grass. There the summer moon, grown large, danced in the running water. A big rock held the lovers. She gazed wistfully, confidently; he made his melody ring each moment with greater appeal.

Just as the music turned from gayety to a minor strain, it ceased abruptly.

The banjo fell to the player's knees, as he gazed about the shop, seeming to beg each silent pledge to tell him its tragic story. Then he rose, and handed the instrument to the pawnbroker.

"The violin," he said, "bespeaks the music of the soul; the banjo, music of the heart. What is the price? Only nine dollars! I may be able to buy it later."

The Box With the Red Label

BY BELLWOOD C. HAWKINS

WRIGGLING forward on his stomach through the prickly pear thicket, his beady, snake-like eyes gleaming evilly in the starlight, Pedro Sanchez, greaser and desert-rat, glided noiselessly up to the edge of the water-hole.

Beyond the still, black pool a campfire glowed, while over it squatted the old German prospector. And inside the little tent, full in the glare of the fire, was that fascinating black box with the flaring red label.

It was to gain possession of the box that Pedro had come to the water-hole. That it contained treasure he never for a moment doubted. From the summit of the ridge that overlooked Lizard Gulch at the base of the distant Spy Glass Range, he had watched the old prospector as he toiled with pick and shovel in the canyon's bed. Ever with him, as he worked, had gone that little box. At night, securely tied in a barley sack, it hung suspended from the ridgepole of his tent, while its owner slept across the opening.

The desert-rat would have had the box long ago if his puny courage had not failed him each time at the crucial moment. Sneak thievery in all its branches was an open book to him, but so far, in his checkered career, he had managed to steer clear of murder. And murder he would have to commit before he could hope to secure the treasure box, for the old prospector slept with his hand on his gun and one eye open.

His supper finished, according to his invariable custom, the greaser's quarry placed the coveted box in the barley sack, suspended it by a light rope from the ridge. pole, wrapped himself in a blanket and lay down across the tent opening. Soon the sounds of his heavy breathing reached the watcher in the pear thicket.

It was now or never! With trembling fingers Pedro pulled a half filled flask of brandy from his hip pocket and drained it at a draught. As the liquid fire of the stimulant coursed through his veins, the desert-rat's courage revived until he was able to work himself up to the state of frenzy required to accomplish his dread design.

His yellow fangs showed in an animal snarl as he drew an ugly looking knife from his belt and crept up on his unsuspecting man. A sudden vicious plunge, a choking gasp from the sleeper, a brief, half-hearted, struggle and the old German lay still.

A few minutes later, Pedro had carried the box, still enclosed in the sack, to the spot where he had left his little buckskin pony in the shelter of the pear thicket. Tying the sack to his saddle horn, he mounted the pony and set out at a brisk gallop across the desert, star guided, in the direction of the Little Mojave

waterhole. He hoped to reach there before morning, water his pony, refill his canteen and hide for a day in a nearby wash-out. The following night he would be able to reach the Panivah water-hole, or with good luck, the town of Panivah, itself. Once there, among the hundreds of Mexican railroad laborers, he would be safe.

As the effect of the liquor wore off and the deadly reaction set in, the murderer began to develop a set of nerves. Every mesquite bush and cactus stump became endowed with life to rise up and point an accusing finger. He tried to whistle to regain his composure, but through his fright-stiffened, leatherly lips, no sound would come. Even the little buck-skin seemed to realize that something was wrong with his master, for he tossed his head impatiently from side to side and shied nervously as little desert creatures, aroused from their midnight lethargy, scuttled across his path.

One thing alone served to soothe him. He had the box with the red label! Of that at least he was sure, for it lay snugly tied to his saddle horn. At the little Mojave water-hole he would take time to examine its contents. . . . . How much gold would it contain? It had been heavy for so small a package. It might hold, perhaps, as much as ten pounds! Two thousand dollars! More than he could earn in two years of blood-letting toil on the railroad. Enough for a dozen grub-stakes. Ah, it was worth the risk after all!

Though the night was cold, a tormenting alcoholic thirst began to trouble the greaser. Several times he drank deeply of his canteen, but the relief was only temporary. Long before daylight his meagre supply of water was exhausted.

His interest in the contents of the mysterious box diminished as his thirst increased. By the time he reached the dry wash-out that he knew would lead him down to the little Mojave water-hole, he had but one idea—to reach that water-hole and drink.

The first glow of coming dawn was just visible on the horizon as he reached a little patch of mesquite and cactus that represented the last shelter before reaching the water-hole. Dropping the reins over his pony's head, he walked softly forward alone, crouching close to the ground.

As he came suddenly around a bend in the wash-out, a savage, half-stifled oath escaped him, for there, a pistol-shot ahead, dimly limned against the grey sky-line, were two horsemen, tense, alert, like sentinels posted to watch for someone—for him, perhaps!

Even his consuming thirst was not sufficient to prod him forward in the face of this unexpected peril. No doubt the murder had already been discovered and these men were on his track! He stumbled back to the thin shelter of the mesquite and cacti, tied his pony firmly to a projecting root, stretched out full length on the sand and lapsed into a sort of stupor.

The desert sun came up and shed its pitiless, scorching rays on the recumbent man; a hot wind filled his mouth, eyes and ears with acrid, choking alkali dust, while innumer-

able buzzing, stinging flies added to his torment.

At regular intervals through the day, he would arouse himself and creep painfully down toward the water-hole, but those two men seemed to have established a permanent camp, for their tent was pitched in the shade of a friendly cottonwood, while their horses were tethered to a limb of a nearby willow tree. Sadly though he needed it, Pedro dared not go after water, so after each disappointment he would return doggedly to his retreat. Not once in that whole miserable day did he bestow more than a passing thought on the box with the red label.

It was near sundown when the two strange men packed up and left the water-hole. With stolid patience, Sanchez watched them until they had passed out of sight in the vibrating heat waves. He had just enough strength left to crawl down the bank to the life-restoring liquid. When several deep draughts of the terpid, stagnant water, had restored both strength and reason, Pedro once more thought of the box to procure which he had stained his hands with human blood.

He must have a look at that box! With eager steps he returned to his recent hiding place. He did not even stop to water his patient, long-suffering pony, but tore wildly at the enveloping sack, removed the box and set it on the sand. The red label flaunted in his very face, but Pedro could not read. This worried him not at all, for it was not information, but the contents of the box that he was after.

It proved to be unlocked. A simple catch secured the top and a moment sufficed to throw it back. But underneath was a second cover of fine-woven wire netting with a narrow opening in the center, like the lid of a fish basket. Into this opening, the greaser thrust his arm almost to the elbow. Then, suddenly, the look of satisfaction on his sinister face changed to one of intense horror. A loud yell of mortal agony broke from his lips and he recoiled from the box as from a thing accursed.

There is a well established legend among the human denizens of the desert that when a Gila Monster bites its victim its jaws will remain clamped to the flesh after life is extinct. When Jum Medford, a prospector from Parivah, stumbled onto Pedro's dead body, he found a case in point, for to the greaser's left hand there still clung the severed head of one of those hideous reptiles, which the desert-rat had cut from the body in a last desperate attempt to free himself. Medford shook his head gravely as he perused the red label on the fatal box:

"Poisonous Reptiles for Floto's Circus. Handle with care!"

The End of the Feud

BY HAROLD DE POLO

IN the little North Carolina town of Dickensville the air was astir with excitement. People stopped to laugh over it on the street, then speak in whispers and wonder if it would really become serious; for it had been noised abroad, no one knew by whom, that John Delpard's son had been heard trying to persuade Old Man Henderson's daughter to marry him, and that Henderson himself had got wind of it.

Now it was common knowledge in Dickensville that Old Man Henderson had been "gunning" for John Delpard for the last twenty years or more; it was, in fact, the one bit of news that never lacked those to speak of it and that never lagged in interest. Northerners coming there for the duck shooting would be told of it over the hotel book as they registered; men passing one another on the road would laughingly remark that they wondered when Delpard was going to "get his," and women spoke of Old Henderson angrily whenever it was mentioned.

Old Man Henderson,—he was not much over forty-eight, but his sour disposition, his surly ways, and his mean temper, had aged him before his time, and for the last ten years he had looked fully fifty-five,—and John Delpard, so the story ran, had been fast friends when they were young men. Both had courted the same girl, and the latter, younger by several years, more handsome, more clever, had won the race and become the husband of Amy Miles. This, immediately, had broken off the friendship; and although his friend and his wife tried to pacify him, Henderson had changed into a mean, remorseless enemy. Many times, during the last twenty years or so, Delpard had tried to patch up the quarrel, but the other would have none of it, even after he himself had married and become the father of a daughter—the girl that young Tom Delpard now wanted to marry!

He still swore that he would yet "get" Delpard; swore it in the blustering, loud-mouthed way of a man that is really most peaceable at bottom, but that is simply trying to convey the impression that he is an extremely dangerous person. But as yet he had never "thrown lead" at his enemy, as he called him; and when mockingly questioned about it by old friends, he would savagely retort that he had never been "totin' his gun" when he had seen John Delpard.

John Delpard, all this time, kept a strict silence about the thing and honestly deplored the whole matter from the bottom of his heart, occasionally trying to make advances to his one-time friend, and always turning sadly away after he had been stormily repulsed, feeling pity, and not enmity,

for the man that apparently hated him with such fervor.

Therefore, when Old Man Henderson, the day that the town had learned of young Delpard's proposal to Rose Henderson, walked down the main street in the direction of the Old Mill road, with his long, double-barreled shotgun, appareled in his hunting clothes, people, knowing well that he was going duck shooting, called out after him asking if he was at last going out for John Delpard's blood. At first these mocking queries only made him scowl angrily; but finally, as everyone took up the same question, he would snarl and turn about and curse them in an ugly manner.

He had no peace until he reached the marshes, where he clambered into his large, flat-bottom boat and pushed away from shore. He went quite a distance before he struck the place where he usually hid his boat among the reeds and waited patiently until he should sight his quarry. To-day, as dusk came on, he had fairly good luck, bringing down five birds with his first two charges. But this did not seem to please him very much, for the sarcastic words of the villagers were still ringing in his head; and, when he quickly sighted a Black Mallard and let go at it, and saw it fall, he muttered angrily to himself, "Lord, but I shore wish that might a' bin John Delpard!" He sat there silently for some moments before going to pick up his catch, thinking what a fool he had been to noise his feelings to the world, receiving, in return, nothing more than ridicule!

But suddenly he was brought to himself, almost as if he had been struck a hard blow. "Henderson, raise yo' han's!" a voice commanded; —a voice that he knew to be that of John Delpard, quiet, firm, decisive.

For a moment he remained absolutely rigid; and then, very slowly, he raised his arms above his head and glanced furtively behind him. There, on the edge of the bank, up to his knees in water, stood Delpard, stern, cool, with a repeating rifle in his hands, covering him with a deadly aim.

"Henderson," the voice went on, "han' me yo' gun!"

Old Man Henderson mechanically did as he was bidden still too stunned to utter a word.

Delpard removed the remaining shell and tossed the gun in the bottom of the boat. "Now throw 'way all them shells yo' got lef'!" he ordered, and watched the other obey his commands to the letter.

Then, when it was over, he looked the older man straight in the eyes. "Henderson, yo' all bin talkin' a heap in the las' twenty year about how yo' goin' git me with yo' gun, see? Well, I reckon I give yo' enough time; an' yo' ain't took no advantage of it, either. I come tu the conclusion that it's 'bout time *I got yo'*, instead of *yo'* gittin' *me!* An' so I jes' think I'm goin' have yo' row up the marsh a bit tu Black Swamp an' let yo' taste a leetle o' *my* lead! That's all, see?"

For a moment Henderson was dumb, and sat looking at the other with wild, scared eyes, almost believing that this was some horrible dream. John Delpard—quiet, peaceable John Delpard—had finally grown tired of his threats and was here to

kill him. "Jo—John." He started to beg for mercy; but the face of the other, usually so calm and good-natured, was now cold and grim. He could expect no mercy there; that he knew. He would simply have to go ahead and take his chances of somehow making his escape.

Delpard stepped into the boat, and seated himself near the bow. "Up tu Black Swamp, Henderson!" he snapped.

Again a qualm swept over the older man; his lined face was quite white, his eyes seemed popping from his head, his throat was dry, and he looked old and weak and broken. "Jo—John," he broke out, "fo'—fo' Go—"

But he got no farther; for Delpard had turned, and his face was that of a hard man determined to do what he had set out to do, brooking no interference, and his quiet grey eyes were narrowed to mere slits and were drilling the other through and through. "Move on!" he said, tersely, his voice icy.

Henderson's shoulders drooped, his face grew bitter, and he listlessly followed the other's long, slow, but powerful strokes, guiding the boat through the shallow, reed-grown waters in the direction of the deeper and lonesomer waters of Black Swamp.

For a good half hour they rowed, neither speaking a single word, until the big ball of sun was completely out of sight beyond the horizon, rendering the swamp a gloomy, desolate place, with weird, fantastic shadows throwing their outlines over the dark water from the gnarled bushes along the bank. But suddenly Henderson saw his chance! Delpard was rowing on with long steady strokes, apparently unconscious of any peril, for he had allowed his rifle to slip down beside him, leaving the butt of it dangerously close to the other's reach.

Henderson eyed the stalwart back craftily; and thought carefully of his chances of gaining possession of the weapon.

Delpard still rowed, keeping his eyes straight ahead.

Then Henderson acted! Like a flash he reached forward, grabbed the stock of the rifle, brought it to his shoulders, and fell back into his former position.

Instantly, Delpard wheeled. For a moment he eyed the other, and then, with a cry, he lifted an oar and prepared to bring it down over the older man's head!

But Henderson was too quick! He did not think of the consequences. It was his death or Delpard's, that was all; and as the oar was raised high in the air, outlined dimly against the dark sky, he pulled the trigger!

He saw Delpard's hands fly back, releasing the oar and throwing it far from him; he heard a loud, gurgling gasp; and then Delpard, his hated enemy, pressed his hands to his head and fell down like a log, his head buried in his arms, far up in the bow of the boat.

The boat shook violently, but finally righted itself and again floated calmly. For a moment Old Man Henderson did not move, but kept his rifle still pointed in the air, where the form of John Delpard had formerly been. His face was utterly blank, his mind fail-

ing, as yet, to fully grasp the thing that he had done.

Then he slowly placed the rifle by his side, crept cautiously forward to the huddled shape in the bow, and reached his hand down to touch it. But he shrank back with a moan, covering his eyes with his hands, trembling and frightened. What had he done? After several moments he gathered a new burst of courage and hastily knelt down and grasped Delpard's shoulder, turning the head so that he might view the face. With a sharp, piercing cry he let it drop, and it fell back with a thud, still farther up into the bow of the big boat.

The face that he had seen,—or what little of it could be seen,—he would never forget as long as he lived! There was not an inch of it that was not red—red, red, red! The red that he had caused to flow! Red—red! God! how he hated the colour!

He crawled clumsily back to his seat in the stern, and crouched there, shaking like a leaf. His whole form was doubled up and bent over so that he looked like a wizened old man. His knees were pressed close together, his elbows were close to his sides, his unsteady fingers were sinking into his cheeks so that the nails left their marks, and he appeared to be doing his best to make his body appear as small as possible, as a man that has committed a crime will often do, trying to shield himself from the world and from God as he can.

At last he had killed John Delpard! At last he had done the deed that he had many times boasted of doing—but that he had never meant to do! He was a murderer, one that had killed one of his own kind, a thing to be shunned by all the world and hunted by the law! He thought it all over: the long, foolish feud, for which he was to blame; his meanness in failing to respond to Delpard's many overtures; his despicable cowardice,—he now called it that,—in being driven on and on, simply because he had at first, in the heat of anger, sworn to have his rival's life, and had not been brave enough to put aside the mockery of the village and go up and beg John Delpard's pardon and become friends! Yes, it was he, and he only, who had at last caused peaceable John Delpard to rise up in his wrath and try and take the life of him, Joel Henderson! But now it was all over—the feud was ended! Oh, God! why had he boasted so openly, day after day, that he was out for Delpard's blood? No wonder that John had finally had enough of it and had tried to kill him! But now the feud was at an end!

Yes; it was ended; but he, undoubtedly, would have to swing for it! Swing for it,—swing for it! The words caused him to feel that spark that comes into the breast of all that kill;—that spark that tells them to try and cover up their crime and escape detection!

He straightened up with a jerk. What could he do,—*what could he do?* He puzzled the thing out within his aching brain! His only chance, he finally concluded, was to row far up into Black Swamp,—where the *thing* in the bow had decided to take *him*,—and quietly throw the body overboard, to rest forever beneath the dark, dismal waters. And so, trem-

bling all over, he lifted up his oars and started out slowly for his destination.

But he found that his strength was so weak that he made very little progress. Also, it was pitch black, for the large, thick clouds entirely covered the brilliant moon, and although he knew the marshes exceedingly well, it was quite difficult for him to follow the right course.

His headway became slower. All about him the drooping willows that lined the banks thrust their desolate limbs up into the air and over the water as if they were hands reaching out for him, appearing still more terrible as a faint wind stirred them up and made their barely discernible shadows play and flicker unsteadily over the glassy surface of the quiet waters. Once, when he was close to the bank, and one of the shadows fell across the boat, he unconsciously shrank back, gripped his oars, and stood on the defensive, thinking that some frightful monster was coming to take him to his just doom for the murder of John Delpard!

But after it had passed away he laughed—a weak, childish cackle that grated horribly on his own nerves as he heard the clear, long-drawn echo of it. If only it was not so dark; if only one could *see!* His eyes, now, were constantly glued to the huddled shape in the bow, and he somehow felt that unless he watched it closely it would rise up from the dead and grasp him,—grasp him with cold, terrible hands and pull him down into the inky waters!

For a moment he nerved himself to do the thing now;—to take the body in the bow and hurl it overboard! He got down on his knees and crawled slowly forward; but then, when his hands reached out for it, he suddenly fell back with a fearful cry of terror on his lips, his heart pounding like a trip-hammer, high in his throat, his face blanched, and his whole body, every single particle of it, shaking spasmodically, like a leaf in a gale.

"God!" he cried, pitifully, his voice quaking, "I can't touch it,—I can't touch it!" His voice rose to a shriek. *"Dear God, I can't touch it!* Mercy, mercy, mercy!" and he sank down into the bottom of the boat a broken, changed man, crying and wailing, utterly beside himself, like a young child that has felt, for the first time, the hand of death on the person of its father or mother.

For a long time he stayed thus, sobbing out his sorrow and mumbling the thoughts that went through his crazed brain. "God, fo'give me, please! I didn' mean it! Me an' him was sech good frien's, once. I bin a fool, I allus bin a fool! He was a man,—*a man!* I don't blame him fo' wantin' tu kill me! I was mean, allus talkin' 'bout gettin' him sometime! God,—*dear God,*—please fo'give me! I'm willin' tu swing, I am; all I ask is fo'giveness!"

Then, suddenly, he picked up Delpard's rifle, thinking to put a bullet through his own head and end it all; but the gun was empty, and again he took up his wailing!

So he went on for a long time, begging his maker to forgive him, imploring the dark shape in the bow to pardon him, crying and moaning in a pitiful, heart-breaking manner. "Dear God, outside o' killin' John,

I've gone an' broke young Tom Delpard's an' my pore little Rosie's heart! Please tell 'em tu marry jes' the same, even if I am a murd'rur! Tell 'em I didn' mean it! Tell 'em, tell 'em, please!"

But suddenly, as the big moon came out from behind the thick clouds that had been hiding it, Old Man Henderson received another great shock!

The form in the bow rose to a sitting posture, and the voice of John Delpard spoke quietly. "Henny!" it said, "I can't stan' it no longer! Yo' ain't killed me!"

Henderson fell back, crouching under his seat, shrieking like a man gone mad. "John,—John! Fo' God's sake don't ha'nt me,—*don't, don't!*"

Delpard rose and sat down calmly in his seat, facing the other. "Henny, ole man," his voice was tender, and he called the older man by the name he had used when they were boys, "I tell yo' I ain't dead; I was only playin' dead, tu give yo' a lesson!"

Henderson raised his head; his voice was low and husky. "Yo'—yo' don't—don't mean it, do yo', Johnnie? Yo' ain't comin' back tu fool me!"

Delpard laughed. "Don't be crazy, Henny, I'm alive as I allus was!"

Henderson stuck his head closer, very slowly, and peered hungrily at the other in the moonlight. "I—I guess yo' are livin', Johnnie!" he said, "I guess yo' are! Thank God,—*thank God!*"

Delpard spoke again, slowly and calmly, with pity in his voice. "Look here, Henny! I didn' like what I had tu do, but 'twas the only thing! I knowed well that no matter how many times I went an' asked yo' tu be frien's yo' wouldn' listen, see? An' then, when my boy tol' me that he loved yo' Rosie, an' that she loved him, I jes' knew that somethin' had tu be done. So I jes' put one blank cartridge intu my rifle an' came an' held yo' up. Everythin' worked out as I reckoned! What yo' thought was blood was only some red ink; and I jes' knew that once yo' thought yo'd really killed me yo'd be sorry, an' see things right! Henry," now it was Delpard's voice that was supplicating, "don't hol' it against me fo' doin' this trick; but I wanted tu be frien's, an' have Rosie an' Tom happy, an' I knowed that this was the only way tu make yo' see things right, as I said, so please don't be mad!" He stopped and held out his hand.

Joel Henderson's face had changed; it no longer looked like that of Old Man Henderson! A new look was in his eyes, a new expression was on his face—the expression of a man that has at last seen the right road ahead of him and that has determined to follow it straight along to the end!

He put out his hand and grasped that of his old friend. "Johnnie," he said, firmly, "yo're—yo're white! God forgive me fo' the dog I've bin! I—I'm a changed man! God bless yo' son Tom an' my daughter Rosie—they kin have all I got! An'—an', Johnnie, we'll allus be frien's like we usta, eh?" and tears of joy came into his eyes as John Delpard silently gripped his hand with all his strength and bowed his head in assent, himself too happy to mouth his words.

The 'Stillers' Rock House

BY F. ANNETTE JACKSON

"HOWDY, thar! you-alls, come eout yere ter th' Big Road, we-alls wanter see yer," called a mountaineer to Doctor Dean, sitting on the hotel veranda in the Blue Ridge Mountains, after all the others had retired.

The doctor had just arrived that evening for a few days' rest from his practice in the city. He was greatly surprised to be hailed by entire strangers, but thinking with a doctor's quick instinct for suffering, that his help was needed, he hastened to the road.

"Who's sick?" he asked, as he saw several men standing in the darkness of the forest's edge by the roadside.

"Thar hain't nobody sick neow, but I reckon 'twon't be long before somebody ez mighty sick," drawled a tall, lank mountaineer, as he stepped out of the shadows, seized and clumsily gagged the doctor, while others tied his hands.

"Nope, hain't nobody sick neow, but ef we-uns hadn't cotched you-uns jest ez we have, thar mought ha' been."

With that, they pulled him along roughly over the rocky path, down, down the narrow, precipitous trail, until they came to one of the "cave-houses" frequently found in the mountains. Within, a smoky lantern was lighted and they let him look around by its dim light. He could see what seemed to be piles and piles of jugs, an immense vat and the remains of a charcoal fire. Even his slight knowledge of the mountains was sufficient to tell him where he was and of his great danger.

Near at hand was a coil of rope which one of the men gathered up and with a bitter, sinister expression on his face began to make a slip-noose in one end.

"I reckon you-alls done knowed what fer we-alls brung yer yere and neow afore yer put eout of yer business ye kin say a word ef yer like."

So saying, one man removed the gag and the other dropped the noose over his head and tightened it uncomfortably.

Doctor Dean had been doing some quick thinking. He knew they had mistaken their man, but how to prove it—to their satisfaction—he did not know. He had met no one at the hotel but his landlord and a man at the supper table whom he had heard called by the name of one of the most famous physicians of the state.

Oddly enough, the conversation, from some chance remark, had turned upon the subject of lying. He had contended that there might be times when one was justified in lying, while the other had declared most emphatically that only the truth was justifiable at all times. He allowed that a very sick person, or one insane, might be deceived, but as to lying—no, never.

Doctor Dean thought of this, yet in this man he saw his only hope. Certainly he dared not trust his landlord, but would the doctor rise to the occasion and help him out!

His captors were waiting silently. He looked at them full in the face and said, "Have you men ever heard of Doctor Fancher? I know he has sometimes practiced in the mountains when off on a vacation."

"Wall," replied one, who they called "Jim," "we-alls mought hev heered ov him."

"He's at the hotel where I just came; he knows me and will tell you that I have never before been in this region," said the doctor.

"Aw come off," snarled one of the men; "you cyan't put that thar over, we-uns knowed thet you-alls air the one thet tried ter inform on we-uns, an' ef hit hadn't ben fer Jim here, them darned revenoo officers would hev jugged us-alls sure, this time. Shooting's jest too good fer ary blamed informer. You-alls like the feel ov thet rope? Wall, thet's what we-alls giv' informers. Ef yer hev ary word ter send yer sweetheart, ef yer hev one, we-uns mought let yer do thet. Big Bill here—he kin write right smart an' he kin write hit down."

Again Doctor Dean looked them fearlessly in the face and repeated his request with the statement, "You sure have the wrong man and *he* can prove it."

The moonshiners looked at each other and the silence deepened, then one spoke, "Wall, hit won't do no good fer we-alls air agoin' ter hang yer."

Jim said, "Hit cyan't do ary harm, an' I'll go git ther doctor-man." The others demurred, but it was plain that Jim was the leader and he went out into the night. The moments seemed like eternities to the doctor as they waited in the oppressive silence and semi-darkness.

At the hotel Jim roused the sleeping clerk, told him that a man was mighty sick and he had come for the "Doctor-man." The clerk hesitated about waking the tired man, who needed all his brief vacation, but Jim glared at him, put his hand in his hip pocket and drawled, "Ef yer knows what's good fer yer, git him an' thet right quick er my man will die."

Doctor Fancher came down sleepily but when he saw Jim he held out his hand with, "Why, Jim, how are you? I haven't seen you since we worked so hard to save your little girl five years ago; is she ill again?" "No." "Well, who is it this time? You fellows won't ever let a poor old doctor rest when he comes up into the mountains just for that purpose."

Jim shook the extended hand with a mighty grip as he said, "A friend ov yourn ez in trouble, mighty bad trouble; he sont me fer you-alls. I owe yer a heap fer what yer done fer my leetle gal an' this here man he says ez how yer know him. My pals sez he's the one thet informed on we-uns. I sattin do hate informers like pizin an' jest ez soon shoot one ez any low-down, pesky houn'; but this here feller, he sez he haint no informer an' he pears like a right peart sort o' feller, so I was fer givin' him the chanct o' provin' hit. Lor', but don't yer let on I tol' yer all this here."

Doctor Fancher guessed who their prisoner was from his likeness to a detective whom he knew was on the trail of the illicit distillers, but he knew and loved the mountaineers. He had camped many times in the mountains and understood the silent reticent "Moonshiner." He knew their bitter hatred for the Revenue Officers and that these men honestly felt that the government was wronging them when it required a tax on the one commodity that they could sell. With no roads, their corn, peaches and apples, could not be marketed, but, made up into brandy or whiskey, it was ready money. They thought the government was depriving them of their legitimate rights as free-born citizens when it demanded a tax on "moonshine" and every mountaineer was ready to shoot a Revenue Officer as quickly as a sheep-killing dog.

All this the doctor thought of, but how could he help a stranger whom he had never seen until that evening, and did not even know his name or business? Then the irony of it—he had declared that lying was justifiable under no circumstances. Yet these men would shoot or hang their captive, he felt sure, unless he could prove them mistaken. It would do no good to threaten them for they knew the mountain fastnesses and could "hid out" in the caves for years if need be. Well, if he had to, he would make as good a bluff as he could and trust that the occasion warranted the deed.

At last they reached the cave and crept in through the low opening protected by an upright rock door.

Then he sang out, "Well, Sam, whatever are you doing here in this fix?"

One of the men answered briefly, "He's a blamed informer, thet's what he is an' he knows hit, tew. But he sez ez how you-alls knows him an' kin prove a alibi on him an' we-alls gin him a chanct."

"Know him! I should say so, known him ever since he came into this old world. I was the doctor that helped him into it about twenty-five years ago."

"What's his business?" inquired Big Bill.

"Business, why, he's a drummer for the very kind of goods you make. Ever heard of the Ginger Brewery Company? He sells their moonshine. I'll tell you, too, you better let him go quick, for that Company has millions back of them and they'll comb these mountains with a fine-tooth comb if anything happens to one of their men. Perhaps he can help you by taking orders! Anyway, you won't go back on a fellow pard. He's no informer; he's in the same kind of business, you see. Who'd you think you'd got, anyway? I know the man you are after and he sure does look like this fellow, but he has black hair not red. You have made a mistake this time, let me tell you."

"We-alls reckoned he sure was the fool informer thet we seed prowlin' thru these mountings an' they air atter us mighty clost," remarked one.

"I tell you he just came from Alabama. He was on the Road there till the state went 'dry'; then he had to go elsewhere and came here for a little rest. It's a mighty good thing the states are going 'dry' but you

chaps musn't be hard on a fellow sufferer."

The men looked at each other and again the silence was long and impressive. Doctor Fancher feared that they might ask questions that would lead him to contradict what the other had already told and Doctor Dean feared the same thing. The stillness could almost be felt, so tense it became.

Finally Big Bill rose and brought a jug which he solemnly opened saying, "I reckon we-alls mought take a dram while we're a-deciding this here question. Hev a drink, man?"

The doctors went through the motions not daring to offend, but did not drink. The other men drank heavy draughts, then all sat in silence again. After what seemed slow ages to the doctors, Jim said:

"I done know the ol' doc well; he's all right an' I reckin we kin take his word. I hain't ever agoin' ter fergit how he saved by leetle gal's life. I 'low hits the wrong man this time an' ef youse sez so I'll take 'em back ter th' Big Road."

Another spoke up sullenly: "Wall, let me tell yer both somethin'; ef yer ever peep ov these yere doin's hit won't be healthy fer yer an' yer won't git off so slick nex' time."

"Yas, thet's sure ez preachin'," emphasized Big Bill. "Ef you-alls haint th' man yer mighty like him an' yer better git eout ov this kentry mighty quick, too, fer thar's others what be on yer trail an' maybe yer won't hev nary doc-friend ter stan' by yer nex' time. Don't yer dast peach er yer won't see daylight long."

Jim guided them through the dark forest along the blind trail. When they reached the road he turned to leave, but both men grasped his hands and tried to express their gratitude, but he would have none of it.

"I done knowed all long youse wez a-lyin'," he said, "fer this here doc, he don't recommember me but I recommembers him all right. He haint nary drummer like youse made eout; he's a doc too, an' las' time when I wez 'sent up' fer follerin' my own rights," he added bitterly, "this here doc he saved my life like youse saved my leetle gal's. He worked mighty faithful when I hed th' fever, too. Atter I seen who 'twas I let on I believed yer tale, an' yer bet I didn't let on ter th' other fellers thet I knowed him. Wall, one on youse saved my leetle gal an' 'tother me, so I be mighty obligated ter youse both. I reckon now some ov my ol' scores is done paid. Ye young Doc, ye clear eout ov here quick, 'twon't be well fer yer ter take yer vacation in these here parts.

"Ol' Doc, ye come over an' see we-alls. My leetle gal, she's the finest in all these mountings, an' my ol' woman, she'll be mighty proud ter see yer," then with a slow wave of the hand he plunged down the trail.

The mountain tops were just lighting up with the first rays of the sun as they walked on to the hotel. To Doctor Dean the dawn came as a new birth, a return to life after facing a horrible death for hours.

He turned, with a deep look of thankfulness on his face, to the man who had so sacrificed his high ideals for him, but the other said with a whimsical smile, "Don't you say any-

thing, you red-headed young rascal! Where are all my theories? It was a mighty good thing we fell into Jim's hands; you'd been a goner sure, if it hadn't been for him. He was grateful to us both, but his sense of honor wouldn't let him even seem to go back on his pals, so he pretended that he believed my yarns. Someway, I am glad he knew I was lying; it saves my conscience, if not my face, as the Chinese say. Now how shall I reconstruct my theories that I have ruined all on your account? Mind you, I still do not believe lying is ever justifiable—under *most* circumstances."

And the weary men went to their rooms for a little rest before the stage should arrive and take Doctor Dean forever from the region of "Still-Caves."

The Bank Envelope

BY WILLIAM HOLLOWAY

FROM a second story window of the Blane mansion in upper Fifth Avenue—a street which at one o'clock in the morning is practically deserted—a long white envelope, after describing quaint circles in the air, like a new species of flying machine, fell softly to the pavement.

Of the two spectators of this little incident, one leaning meditatively against the low stone wall of Central Park, was too far away to notice more than a flutter of white as the envelope settled earthward. The second—a tall, elderly man, whose immaculate evening clothes were hidden beneath a dark raglan—was not twenty feet from the Blane mansion when the envelope began its volplaning flight. With outstretched arms he followed its eccentric movements until it thudded gently to the sidewalk, almost directly at his feet. In another instant he had clutched it in his trembling fingers.

It was a bulky, oblong white envelope, of a sort generally used by banks in returning cancelled cheques to out-of-town customers. In the upper left hand corner above the printed name, "Blane & Co.," were scrawled the initials "B.P.B." which any Wall Street man would have recognized as those of Bertrand Putnam Blane, head of the great banking house which, for more than a generation, has ruled the financial destiny of New York.

In the lower left-hand corner the same pen had written and underlined the two words, "Very Important," but the rest of the envelope, save for the letter "M" in the middle, was entirely blank, showing that fate had taken a hand in the matter just as Mr. Blane was about to write the address!

All this the elderly passerby took in with one feverish glance. Then the envelope vanished from view beneath the dark raglan. Despite his seventy years, old Henry Porter, head of the banking firm of Porter Bros. —an institution second only to that of Blane & Co.—was a man of decision.

It was a time when decision was needed; for with Porter Bros. and Blane & Co., contending for control of the famous "L.D.K." Railroad, Wall Street was on the brink of a panic. All that day scare headlines in the yellow press had announced the victory now of one side, now of another, while the price of "L.D.K." shares went soaring.

Somebody was caught in "L.D.K." the wise ones averred, but nobody but Henry Porter himself knew that Porter Bros. was the victim, or that the old-established banking-house stood on the edge of a financial abyss.

This very evening he had been wandering restlessly up and down the Avenue, mentally reviewing the situation in "L.D.K.," without finding a

loophole of escape. To-morrow he would have to go to Blane & Co. and ask for terms. He had even thought of calling at the Blane house this evening, and hoisting a flag of surrender. There was a light in the three-windowed library on the second floor—one of the famous rooms of New York. Henry Porter remembered it well. It was there that he had gone to see Jared Blane, his old antagonist, lying in his coffin.

Once, twice, he had paused irresolutely before the door, without being able to summon courage enough for the humiliation which the late call implied. He was bracing himself for the third attempt when the envelope fluttered from the library window to his feet.

In emergencies the trained mind acts quickly; and Henry Porter, who had won his spurs in that financial maelstom which men call Wall Street, possessed an intellect whose conclusions were lightning fast.

The instant his cold grey eyes fell upon the initials scrawled on the upper right-hand corner of the long white envelope, and the words, *"Very Important,"* his decision was taken. Fate, that blind incomprehensible force which juggles with the affairs of men, had granted him another cast of the dice. And, in the last extremity, who may deny the whims of Fate?

Certainly not the surprised and delighted Mr. Porter, as he turned the nearest corner and walked slowly eastward. After weary delay, the game had certainly come his way with a vengeance. Bertrand Blane did not address important envelopes at one o'clock in the morning, with a financial crisis impending, unless the contents of the envelope were really important. The heavy white envelope felt as though it contained bonds—and bonds are always negotiable!

There was nothing in his attitude that suggested flight. Tall and imposing of figure, his thin face rounded out by snowy, mutton-chop whiskers, Henry Porter was the last man in the world whom a passing policeman would have dreamed of halting; though many a policeman up on charges would have envied him his self-possession.

Even the sound of life in the Blane mansion: the opening of the front door, and the clatter of a breathless servant upon the sidewalk, quite failed to disturb his calmness. Dignified, austere, he continued his easterly stroll, the very last person in the great city who would have been suspected of carrying off an important envelope which he knew belonged to another!

Meantime things were happening in front of the Blane mansion. The servant had barely had time to cast a hurried glance about the sidewalk when the front door opened for the second time, and Bertrand Blane appeared upon the threshold.

The great banker's smooth-shaven, clear-cut face was shadowed with anxiety—anxiety which showed in his quick run down the steps to the pavement.

"Did you find it, Henry?" he asked sharply.

"No, sir; not yet, sir," answered the man promptly.

"Then it's here," said Bertrand Blane, and straightway began searching the wide stone sidewalk.

But neither on the steps, nor on the sidewalk, nor in the street, was there the slightest trace of the missing envelope. The areaway, marble-tiled, immaculate, was also guiltless of any scrap of paper, as an instant's glance showed, an arc-light on the corner rendering the neighborhood of the Blane mansion as light as day.

"Confound the thing!" exclaimed the young banker—he was not more than thirty-five, which is young to be the head of a great banking house—just as a stray policeman, scenting trouble, appeared upon the scene.

"Have yez lost something?" he asked, swinging his nightstick.

"A long white envelope fell out of my library window just one minute ago," explained Bertrand Blane hastily. "It was quite heavy and it couldn't get far out of plumbline. Then, besides, there's not a breath of air stirring; so it must have fallen straight. But there's not a sign of it anywhere."

The policeman surveyed the vacant expanse of lighted sidewalk with professional rapidity. "How big was the envelope?"

"About a foot long," explained the banker; "one of the envelopes used by the banks for returning cancelled cheques to out-of-town customers. You know the kind. It was white and in the corner had our name, 'Blane & Co.'"

"Blane & Co? The big bankers?"

"Exactly," was the impatient answer. "I am Mr. Blane."

"Valuables in the letter?"

"There was no money," Bertrand Blane explained hastily. "But the contents of the envelope were very valuable—very valuable indeed. There were things in that envelope I wouldn't lose at the present time for millions."

"Holy snakes!" gasped the officer, his eyes bulging. "Somebody's copped it for sure!"

He ran hastily to the corner and peered eastward. "There's a guy walking away," he reported. "Looks like there might be something doing. Anybody else around?"

He turned toward Central Park—then shook his head. "I just came through the Park myself," he said regretfully. "Nobody went that way."

Once more he swung toward the banker, his gestures wonderfully quick for a man of his heavy build. "Did this man come out ahead of you?" he asked, touching the servant with his nightstick.

"Ten seconds, no more."

"Then he'll stand frisking," was the assured answer; and the indignant footman was searched by a practised hand.

"Nothing doing," was the report. The nightstick was twirled violently. "Better 'phone the precinct, Mr. Blane," he said hurriedly. "And mention that John Dwyer—Dwyer, do you mind—is after a suspect."

And with another whirl of his nightstick, Policeman John Dwyer dashed hastily eastward on the trail of Henry Porter!

Columbus in sight of land probably experienced a similar feeling of joy to that of Henry Porter, as he strolled carelessly eastward, hugging the precious bank envelope to his breast beneath the friendly shelter of the

raglan. But it may be doubted if the joy of the discoverer of the New World was nearly so intense as that of Henry Porter. For the latter had the active enmity of years to spur him on, and, in addition, the frantic desire for self-preservation common to cornered rats and to cornered bankers.

What there might be in the long bank envelope, Henry Porter did not know, nor did he dare pause upon the street to find out. What he suspected, from the bulkiness of the envelope, was bonds—bonds whose value might well run into the millions. He, himself, had often seen thinner envelopes, the value of whose contents could only be expressed in seven figures. And in the present case, with Wall Street on the verge of a panic, and the credit of Blane & Co., vast as it was, greatly extended, it stood to reason that Bertrand Blane was not sitting up in his library at one in the morning filling a bank envelope with waste paper—especially if that bank envelope was marked *"Very Important."*

So it came about that Henry Porter, chuckling gaily until his saturnine face fairly began to beam, walked slowly eastward toward his home on Madison Avenue. At intervals he glanced backward over the deserted street and laughed softly. And then, suddenly, there came a clatter of feet upon the pavement, and he knew himself to be pursued.

As the sharp staccato sounds of pursuit came nearer, Henry Porter paused idly by the curbstone, his eyes bright with expectation, his keen face aglow with interest—paused until Policeman Dwyer halted, breathless, beside him.

"Good evening, officer," he said with quaint old-fashioned politeness. "How I wish I were young enough to run like that!"

Policeman Dwyer's round face was a study in confusion. "Have ye just come by Mr. Blane's house?" he demanded hoarsely.

Henry Porter slowly shook his head. "I came the other way, officer," he answered quietly; "walking northward. I am Henry Porter, head of the banking house of Porter Bros., and I have been taking a stroll before retiring. Is there anything the matter at Blane's. House afire?"

Officer Dwyer gurgled hoarsely, inarticulately, and was silent. "There's a valuable envelope missing there," he explained, recovering the use of his tongue. "Somebody picked it up from the street not three minutes ago, and Mr. Blane says he wouldn't lose it for millions."

"Wouldn't lose it for millions," repeated Henry Porter calmly, while his heart gave a fierce, exultant bound. "Then I advise you to hurry on." He then drew out his pocketbook. "Here is my card, officer, if I can be of any service."

"Yes, sir," stammered Officer Dwyer. "You didn't see anyone ahead of you on the Avenoo, sir?"

"Only one man," was the answer; "and I didn't notice him particularly as I was absorbed in thought. He was just in front of the Blane house, under the electric light, when I turned east."

"Going north?" asked Dwyer eagerly.

"Exactly!" said Porter curtly.

"Then I'll be off," cried Dwyer, springing forward with a bound and vanishing into the night.

Left alone, Henry Porter stood watching the retreating form of officer Dwyer, while a slow smile overswept his face. "Worth millions!" he repeated exultantly. "Worth millions!" And the rhythm of the words seemed to be caught up by the pale stars and chanted by the universe in chorus. The coming day there would be a new story told in Wall Street, where to-day men had whispered that the Porter ship was nearing the breakers!

He was still smiling when a hand was laid upon his arm, and a shriveled, wrinkled face—the face of a man whom the years had treated unkindly—looked into his.

"Hand it over!" ordered a sharp voice.

Henry Porter came to himself with a start. In a flash his triumphant visions faded into dull reality. A man was actually holding him up in the street!

With Henry Porter to think was to act. He turned swiftly upon the intruder, his clean-shaven face set and stern.

"If you don't move on I'll have you arrested," he said sharply. "There is an officer just around the block."

The newcomer, who was a small, nondescript type of man, wearing a dark derby hat, plain dark overcoat and dark clothes—the kind of elderly man who swells the returns of the suburban railroads—laughed quietly.

"I'm not after your money, Mr. Porter," he answered grimly. "What I want is the envelope that fell out of Blane's window five minutes ago."

"My good man!" exclaimed the great banker icily. "Do you happen to be drunk, or crazy? Envelope that fell out of Blane's window? Do you mean Bertrand Blane's?"

"No, I mean Charlie Murphy's," said the small man flippantly. He shifted his position and a sharp protuberance became visible in his right-hand overcoat pocket. "I've got you covered with a pleasant little automatic, you old pirate," he went on. "Suppose you hand over that envelope."

"Really," demurred Henry Porter, "you must be dreaming. "Do I look like a man who would take anything not my own?"

"Do I look like a hold-up man?" was the counter question. "Say," the little man went on, "there's no use bluffing; I saw you pick the thing up; that's all there is to that. I was hanging round the Blane house at the time because I wanted to get a word with that other pirate, Bertrand Blane."

With the swiftness of decision that marked all his movements, the other changed his tactics. "Suppose we talk the thing over," he suggested. "You are misinformed, but I am willing to talk matters over. Are you in trouble?"

The little man laughed unpleasantly. "I live in Jersey and I raise chickens, but I'm not quite so green as that. For thirty years I edited copy on the 'New York Orb' and I'm not open to replenish my stock of gold bricks. Do you get that?"

"I am walking east," suggested

the banker suavely, turning to go.

The bulging automatic became more prominent. "Look here," said the little man savagely. "Every cent I have saved went into steel. I bought at 90. This week I had to sell out—that's too long a story to tell now—and I got 18. Why? Because you and Blane are fighting over 'L.D.K.,' putting it up to the sly and slamming every other stock down. I'm no speculator. I'm an investor. Do I get a show? Not on your life. You pound me out of four-fifths of every cent I had in the world; my wife gets sick worrying; and you turn Wall Street that ought to be a place where an honest man can invest his earnings, into an Inferno."

"Now really," protested the banker, lifting his hand.

"Now really," snarled the other. "Cut it out, bo!" His wrinkled face grew on the sudden placid. "I suppose you wonder why I'm telling you this? Well, say, there isn't going to be any trouble after I get that envelope, is there? You can't raise a holler. It's a pipe. Now hand it over. I saw Blane out on the sidewalk looking for that envelope and you bet it's worth while."

He extended his hand insistently, even as Henry Porter drew back. "Look here!" cried the latter. "I can have you arrested for carrying that revolver. There's a fixed post around the corner."

The little man laughed. "I think I was crazy when I came into town to-night. I carried that for Blane. I meant to see him and ask him one or two unpleasant questions. Then came that envelope sailing out of the window. Say, it was a bird!" He pressed the end of the automatic against the banker's body. "Out with it!" he commanded. "Out with it!"

Thus adjured, Henry Porter gazed an instant in the other's wrinkled face. Reader and ruler of men as he was, he understood the message printed there. With a gesture of the sharpest disappointment, he plunged his hand beneath his raglan and produced the coveted envelope. Then shrugging his shoulders, without a word he continued his walk eastward.

Orestes Renwick, the famous artist, whose portraits of fashionable New York women bid fair to become classic, was in a savage mood. Commissions had been bad of late owing to the financial stringency. Half a dozen representatives of the nouveaux riches and two of the Knickerbocker had unexpectedly cancelled orders. Meanwhile, his wife's bills for the furnishing of their new house in the smartest section of the east seventies kept growing, much as the proverbial snowball rolling down the proverbial mountain. The worst of the matter was that neither in word nor in deed did he dare to make protest. For one thing, he was too much in love with his wife to call a halt to her plans unless it became absolutely necessary. For another, the newspapers had made so much of the artistic luxury of his new home, his patrons had come to expect such unique perfection in his household, that to give up the project now would be to deal his prestige a fatal blow.

So it came that, strolling through

Central Park late at night, as was his custom, he witnessed the meeting between Henry Porter and the little man from New Jersey. The precise nature of the interview he was of course unable to understand, but from the scraps of words that came to him, as he lurked in the shelter of a nearby stoop, and from the violent gestures of the smaller man, he decided that he was witnessing nothing less than an ordinary hold-up. This opinion a little phrase uttered in a louder tone than the rest speedily dissipated.

"Hand it over! Saw Blane—sidewalk looking—envelope—worth while."

Orestes Renwick caught his breath sharply as he saw the automatic bulge beneath the assailant's overcoat; caught it more sharply still as he watched the banker draw from beneath his raglan a long white envelope, which in the starlight shone palely against the black background. In a flash he came to his decision. An envelope which was worth while to Blane and Porter was worth while to him. There was a certain novel artistry in the manner in which he went about the task of obtaining possession of the coveted bit of paper. Crossing the street, he ran hastily after the possessor of the automatic; while that individual, hearing footsteps behind him, suddenly halted.

"Mr. Porter wishes to see you at his home at once," he said breathlessly; "he asks me to tell you that he can realize on the contents of the envelope much more easily than you can."

"Forget it!" said the little man, with a wave of his hand. And, even as he spoke, the right fist of Orestes Renwick collided sharply with the point of his jaw, and he fall with a clatter to the sidewalk, momentarily dead to the world.

The artist slowly flexed the huge muscles of which he was so inordinately proud; then, with a quick movement of his prehensile fingers, despoiled his victim of the fated bank envelope. He had barely clutched it in his hand when there came upon the scene no less a person than Jimmy the Rat.

Any way you look at it, Jimmy the Rat, is out of place in this story. For one thing, his social position—Jimmy's regular reception days are on what is technically termed "the Island," with an occasional lapse to the austere beauties of Sing-Sing—makes him rather out of place in the company of bankers and artists. For another, Jimmy was a professional and the others, as will have been noticed, were the rankest kind of amateurs.

But Jimmy, who, by the merest chance happened to be passing down Madison Avenue when Orestes Renwick made his great play, has two advantages that serve him well: a pair of rubber shoes and a small section of gas-pipe! The first brought him on the scene of action as noiselessly as a phantom; the second, skillfully applied to the back of the artist's head, put him in possession of the bank envelope, as it fell from Orestes Renwick's nerveless hand.

And then Jimmy the Rat, his shriveled form convulsed with silent laughter, turned away to pastures new. "That," he told himself, "was a pipe! It sure was!"

Captain Anderson of the neighboring precinct was in a decidedly unpleasant frame of mind. Bertrand Blane had had him on the 'phone and in a moment of forgetfulness he had been rude to the banker. He was paying for it now as Mulberry Street began to get wakened up.

One by one the messages came in and none of them made pleasant reading for the captain of the precinct. The Central Office was sending a number of its best detectives; Police Headquarters was turning things upside down in a vain effort to recover the missing envelope; worst of all, the Commissioner himself had called him on the 'phone.

"His Nibs!" he confided hoarsely to his sergeant, as he hung up the receiver. "And hot under the collar! Say, he ain't turning this little burg upside down for that envelope, oh, no! Not at all!"

"Valuable envelope?" suggested his confident, pursing lips.

"Only worth a few millions or so," was the grim answer. "It's up to us to find it or somebody's going broke. "What the devil was Dwyer doing? Anybody heard from Dwyer?"

"Here you are," cried an unexpected voice, and Officer Dwyer entered from the street. In his hand he carried a white bank envelope, which he placed solemnly on the desk. Behind him two assistants marshalled an odd assortment of visitors.

"Here's the envelope that fell out of Mr. Blane's window and here's Mr. Blane himself."

The great banker nodded pleasantly, and Captain Anderson's face, which had threatened apoplexy, grew normal again. "Delighted," he observed in his best manner, reaching out his hand. "And Mr. Porter, too," he added, turning to that gentleman. "Not to speak of Jimmy the Rat, and two strangers." He pulled at his long, straw-colored mustache. "Suppose you talk, Dwyer."

Officer Dwyer saluted. "When the envelope fell out of the window, Mr. Porter picked it up, and went off with it!"

"Picked it up?" asked the captain hoarsely. "Went off with it? And Blane's name on it? Why—"

"I don't know why," said Officer Dwyer composedly. "Mebbe he couldn't see it wasn't his. Mebbe he could. I don't know. I'm sticking to facts. Anyway, the little fellow here took it from Porter because he's been losing money in stocks lately—a straight hold-up. He's come across with the story. Next, this other guy, Renwick, the artist, that does the fancy mugs you see in the Sunday papers—up and cops it from the little chap. After which, along sneaks Jimmy and hands the artist the kebunk on the coco, and I nabs Jimmy! And there you are!"

"Well of all the—" began the astounded captain. He paused abruptly. "And do you mean you are preferring charges against Mr. Porter?"

"Dwyer squared his shoulders. "I do," he declared resolutely.

Captain Anderson grew thoughtful. In imagination he was seeing himself the centre of a famous Wall Street mystery. "Then we'll have to see what's in the envelope," he decided. "Worth millions they say. Bonds. I suppose, Mr. Blane?"

Bertrand Blane, who had been listening attentively, grew suddenly red; then his face turned pale; after which it grew red again; the whole performance culminating in a burning blush. "It isn't bonds," he stammered. "It isn't bonds."

"No?" said the captain. "Then, as the precinct has been turned upside down, perhaps you'll tell us what it is."

"The young banker grew, if possible, more agitated than before. "I did tell Dwyer I wouldn't lose it for millions," he admitted. "And I don't suppose I would, but it isn't money. You see, Captain, my wife is down at our Long Island place and to-night at half past twelve—well, it's our first and it's a boy!"

"The devil!" cried the astonished captain. "And what has that got to do with the envelope?"

"I had the things ready," the banker went on, "and I was waiting for a telephone from the doctor. When it came, I slipped them in the envelope and sealed it. Just as I was going to address them to Master Bertrand Havelock Blane—the Havelock is for his mother, you know, the envelope blew out of the window. That's all, Captain."

"All?" cried Captain Anderson, banging his hand furiously upon the desk. "Not by a jugful! What I want to know is what's in this envelope everyone has been grabbing? Jewels did you say?"

For an instant the master of Wall Street hesitated. Then he manfully took the plunge. "It's just the very finest pair of baby bootees you ever saw in your life, Captain."

"Baby shoes!" echoed the captain weakly. "Oh, Lord!" He turned to his sergeant. "My compliments to the commissioner," he said savagely, "and tell him I've dropped two burglaries and a murder case to-night, but that baby's shoes are safe!"

He swung about again face to face with Bertrand Blane, and as he did so, something very like a grin appeared upon his granite lips. "The first, eh, Mr. Blane? That accounts for it. I remember myself—"

Henry Porter interrupted. His face was haggard; his voice weary; the world he loved was slipping from his grip. "If you don't mind, officer, and if there's no charge, I'll go on. I have a hard day before me to-morrow."

Bertrand Blane caught his father's ancient rival by the arm. "Not on my account," he protested. "I've been thinking of doing something in honor of my boy and I can't imagine anything better than calling off this silly fight that has been demoralizing Wall Street. So I'm going to share control of 'L.D.K.' with you. I'll have a statement ready for the press before I'm ten minutes older." He shook the old man's hand excitedly. "Nine pounds! Say, what do you know about that!"

Henry Porter's wrinkled face melted into a smile. "Fine!" he answered heartily. "A wonderful boy that! I owe him something for to-night." He turned to the little man from New Jersey, his face still smiling. "Come to my office to-morrow and I'll see that you get the 90 points for your steel stock," he said kindly.

"And Renwick here," went on

Blane, turning to the artist, "must paint the boy as soon as he can."

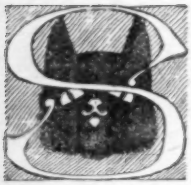
Orestes Renwick, conscious of the luck of the gods, felt his battered head and smiled. "Here, Jimmy," he cried, pushing a yellow-back into Jimmy the Rat's itching palm. "I owe you something for that lucky crack on the head." Jimmy grinned knowingly.

"Commissioner on the 'phone again, sir," interrupted the sergeant. "What shall I say?"

Captain Anderson surveyed the famous banker with a knowing grin. "Tell him it weighs nine pounds," said he.

"Paw's" Hopeful

BY H. P. HOLT



OME people should never be trusted beyond their mother's apron strings, but Percy Bliss made no bones about telling everyone on board the ship that he was being sent abroad by his father—he pronounced it "paw"—because he had been having a too good time in England. "Paw" had stood it up to a certain point and then even his patience had come to a end, so the fattened calf, Percy explained amiably, was presented with a brand new ticket to Cape Town, enough money to see him fairly on the road to perdition, and a father's eternal farewell blessing coupled with definite instructions never to darken the portals of his ancestral home again.

Exactly what means Percy intended to adopt in Africa to keep fattened were not very clear. He seemed to have a hazy notion—not unusual among those who have never been there—that lumps of gold were lying about, and that the task of supporting oneself instantly became simplified when one set a foot ashore. But for the fact that he did not appear to mind much what the future held in store for him, it seemed rather pitiful. People wondered quietly how "paw" had made the mistake of standing it as long as he had.

Percy was not of the type who battle against any odds that come along. He had a rare taste in brightly tinted socks, his hair was parted with such mathematical accuracy that it seemed a shame for him to sleep in it, and his most important possession appeared to be an ambitious young moustache that should really have been nipped in the bud on account of its colour scheme. Also, he wore spectacles with large, round gold rims, which made him look like a parody of a young man.

As a matter of course, one or two ship sharks tried to get an opportunity of getting a nibble at Percy's cash in hand, but, as Percy explained, on recognizing the symptoms, he was taking no unnecessary risks, the bottom having fallen out of the place where supplies had come from hitherto.

It was after one particularly audacious nibble, which made even Percy Bliss scornful, that he retired into his shell and held himself aloof from his fellow men. He distrusted innocent and guilty alike and rarely spoke to anyone except a keen-eyed individual named, so far as the ship's papers were concerned, Charles Smith.

Mr. Smith spent most of his time playing cards and diminishing the contents of bottles; and when the mood came upon him, he allowed Percy to bask placidly in his presence and buy drinks for him. Now, it must not be inferred that Percy was all fool. He was quite wise enough to guard his money from any attack by the

ship sharks, providing it was not too subtle, and he did not splash his money around in buying cooling beverages for Charles Smith entirely without an object. Mr. Smith, also, was getting off the boat at Cape Town and Mr. Smith had been there before. It is a great thing to be able to step ashore at foreign places with a guide, philosopher and friend. Moreover, both Percy and Mr. Smith were dimly conscious of the feeling that there were some things they had in common. Mr. Smith paid no attention to this point for some time, but once, when it struck him, he spent five minutes amusing himself intensely by dissecting the very soul of Percy Bliss and then he smiled up his figurative sleeve. It seemed a shame for fate to fling such easy game to the prowling horde in Africa. He decided to prevent such a thing happening. But the course he decided upon was not a wholly charitable one. Gentlemen of the Charles Smith breed do not keep themselves going by means of charity.

The keen-eyed Smith's wolf face was a clear indication of his character. He was by nature and practice a crook, but he had taken infinite pains to hide the fact on the boat, hoping to enlarge his financial outlook by the adroit use of his wits at the card table or in any other quarter where things looked promising.

Mr. Smith derived a living in jerks by the simple process of keeping two eyes open and forgetting that such a thing as a conscience existed. Any sheep was good enough for his shears, providing there was enough wool on its back. He roved the wide world in one prolonged effort to avoid honest toil, snipping the fleece from a sheep here and a sheep there, and sometimes running so close to the law that a sunbeam could not squeeze in between. Once, in his early days, he had caught himself left alone with his last dollar, which discovery gave him such a painful shock that he never repeated the experiment. A crook without capital is as badly off as a prophet with no takers. Sometimes he had even exercised considerable self-denial to prevent his dwindling cash from vanishing altogether, and at these moments any sheep that came his way was unlucky. He was not blind to the fact that Percy was leaning gently upon him, and this seemed to Mr. Smith quite in accordance with the fitness of things. He continued to allow Percy to lean until the boat had passed Las Palmas, and then permitted himself to unbend a trifle. It began in an odd half hour late one evening in the smoke room. Mr. Smith had a large and soothing drink in front of him. Percy was toying with something less cheering.

"You got any definite plans?" Mr. Smith asked.

"Not exactly," Percy replied.

"Well, South Africa isn't altogether populated with angels," Mr. Smith observed, "and a man who hasn't all his wits about him there is liable to feel a draught."

"That's what I am rather afraid of," assented Percy dolefully.

"Then you need to be mighty careful. What's the extent of your capital?"

"Paw gave me a thousand pounds, but I can't have another bean when that's gone."

"Umph! You won't live in luxury on that very long," remarked Mr. Smith thoughtfully. His eyes were narrowed and he took careful stock of his companion. "I wonder—" he began; but his voice trailed off into nothingness. There was a pause.

"You were saying you wondered something," Percy prompted after a discreet interval.

"Ye-es," said Mr. Smith, "but one has to be careful in discussing intimate business affairs with strangers. I was thinking, I have been watching you for several days, and it is just possible that we might be able to do something together."

"I'd be jolly glad," urged Percy. "The only thing is, I haven't been used to hard work, you know."

Mr. Smith grinned rather grimly. Hard work and he were entire strangers.

"Physical labour provides one with bread and cheese," he said, "but one has to use brains to obtain the sweeter things in life."

"Yes, I suppose so," Percy agreed, not looking particularly brilliant as he said it.

"Of course," went on Mr. Smith, scanning his finger nails abstractedly, "there are—well, there are certain risks to take sometimes."

"How do you mean, exactly?"

"You see, to draw the really big money one may have to skirt just outside the law at times."

"Oh, I say, Mr. Smith, you don't suppose I'd go in for being a jolly burglar."

Mr. Smith sighed as one who felt he might be wasting his breath.

"Crude work like that can be left to those who come out of the underworld. But, as a matter of fact, I'm afraid you would not be much help to me," said Mr. Smith.

Percy's face depicted his disappointment.

"I'll be in an awful hole sooner or later if I don't do something," he said. "Paw was very definite about cutting off my allowance."

Mr. Smith looked at him long and carefully.

"Would you be willing to take a certain amount of risk?" he asked. "You don't look like a wrong 'un and it is that which might make you useful."

"I'd take any risk you would," Percy declared stoutly.

"Don't be too sure about that," replied Mr. Smith. "I have had some mighty narrow squeaks in the course of a lifetime, but, anyway, it sounds good. Now," he added, lowering his voice and bringing his head nearer to that of Percy with the instinctive caution of one who is treading on unholy ground, "if you had a really first class, forged bank note given to you could you bring yourself to pass it off without giving the show away in your looks?"

Percy's eyes seemed to grow larger through his glasses. It was a curious proposal.

"I—I think so," he said cautiously.

"Well, you look the part naturally," commented Mr. Smith. "Nobody would begin by suspecting you, and that is half the battle. Did you ever hear of Slim Jim?"

Percy recoiled a few inches. The whole world knew Slim Jim, at least by reputation. He was London's

master crook, who had baffled the police for years. Only a few weeks before England had been searched from end to end for Slim Jim who had brought off one of his magnificent coups by employing the most skilful forger out of prison on the task of producing bank notes. The forgeries were works of art. Neither money nor care had been spared in obtaining the best possible results, the consequence being that it almost took an expert to detect the fraud. Unfortunately, in a bibulous moment, the forger had dropped a hint of his latest sphere of activity, bringing the wolves of Scotland Yard down upon his heels; and he and Slim Jim had to vanish into thin air. The master crook, ever ready for such an emergency, had apparently ceased to exist, but the bank officials were left guessing how many counterfeit notes were in his possession.

"You don't mean to say—you can't be Slim Jim?" Percy said in awe-struck tones.

"No, of course not," replied Mr. Smith, "and if I were, I shouldn't publish the fact to the wide world. This isn't the first time I have had dealings with him, though. If you can see as far through a brick wall as most people, you must realize that this isn't a healthy moment for him to be caught palming off forged notes. There is a whole fortune of them safely under lock and key at the Universal Safe Deposit in London. Everyone who handles a note in England just now looks at it suspiciously, wondering whether it is a bit of Jim's engineering. In the course of time that will blow over. Meanwhile, the only thing to do is to tap the market in the Colonies. Nice little parcels of notes are being sent to me at various places. There is no need for you to know more than that. In fact, the less you know, the less likely you are to look guilty. Two can work a game like this better than one. If you are collared, all you'd have to say would be that someone seemed to have passed the note off on you. Now, are you willing to come in on a commission basis?"

Percy moistened his lips.

"I say, it's a bit near the bone, you know," he said, "but I suppose it means a little jaunt all over the jolly globe, eh?"

"You've got the idea," agreed Mr. Smith.

"All right," observed Percy. "You'll put me up to the game properly, of course?"

"Certainly. Now for the business side of it. Half the money goes to Jim. You and I split the other half, paying our own expenses. That's fair, eh?"

"It's fine."

"Right. Now I have five hundred pounds all in gold, with me. I decided that it would be safest considering the game I was playing. I suppose your money is in notes?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. By the way, I hope they are all right—none of Jim's among them, I mean."

"I don't expect so," Percy said, slightly perturbed at the thought. "Come down to my cabin and we'll see."

The plotters adjourned to Percy's quarters, where the notes were ex-

mined carefully by Mr. Smith.

"They're good enough. I wish I had a million of 'em," he observed. "Jim's are good, but the watermark is slightly faulty and there are one or two other trifling differences."

During the rest of the run, Percy and Mr. Smith grew to know one another better, and they mapped out the first portion of their itinerary with minute care.

Every thing was cut and dried when they stepped off the gangway and drove to the most sumptuous hotel they could find. The newly made friendship was cemented that evening in a way that would have made Percy's "paw" raise his eyebrows. It was late when they returned to their hotel.

"We don't want to be seen round with too many notes," observed Mr. Smith. "It might possibly arouse suspicion. I'll give you gold for a hundred of your fivers, and you'd better deposit the rest in a sealed envelope with the hotel manager."

"Certainly," assented Percy, willing to agree to anything in reason; and in his bedroom he handed over five hundred in notes in exchange for the gold.

"Now you put your other notes in this envelope," said Mr. Smith. "Here's some sealing wax. Reach me one of those matches."

While Percy was doing so, Mr. Smith made a quick exchange of envelopes. A few moments later, they gravely gave the sealed package to the manager.

"You won't hand it out to anyone but me, will you?" said Percy. "It's awfully valuable, you know."

"It remains in my safe now till you ask for it," replied the manager; and the two plotters went to their respective rooms.

A little later, Percy, bearing no trace whatever of the evening's alcoholic adventures, appeared before the hotel clerk with his capacious handbag and paid his bill.

"I've changed my mind about stopping," he said. "If anyone asks, tell them I have gone up-country by the midnight train."

"Yes, sir," replied the sleepy clerk, and then he bit the end of his pen thoughtfully.

"Funny thing," he observed, half aloud, "that's two of 'em tonight who have paid their bill and cleared out before they'd really got here, as you might say."

Percy headed toward the station for a hundred yards and then turned down a side street toward the docks. He mounted the gangway of a steamer twenty minutes before it left the quay for Durban.

There was nothing simple about his looks as he leaned over the side and watched the harbour drop behind.

"He shouldn't have tried that envelope dodge on me," he soliloquized with a quiet smile. "I might not have taken his money but for that—perhaps. Now, I wonder what sort of a fool he will take himself for when he finds those notes aren't quite up to bank sample. Him for Slim Jim's partner, eh! No, thanks. The lonely game has always been good enough for me."

The Confession

BY FLORENCE BRINEY REED

TWILIGHT was gathering in the little Mexican village. In the western sky a long line of gold melted into violet, and in the gray above the distant eastern mountains a few stars were sprinkled. Within the church it was already quite dark.

The never dying light in the High Altar above the Host glowed like ruby and below it the pale flames of the altar candles burned pure and steady. The priest was within the Confessional, and a few penitents knelt on the stone floor and told their rosaries, waiting their turn for confession.

It was Father Anselmo who heard confessions tonight and all loved the gentle old priest dearly; his tones and looks were gentle and his penance was light, for the good father had ever a great sympathy with the sinning children, and all preferred to confess to him rather than to his assistant, a younger man, with piercing black eyes and thin lipped mouth.

Father Anselmo had mild blue eyes and a loving smile, and little children ran quickly to meet him, and the weary faces brightened when he came by. Tonight many had slipped quietly into the church and knelt with bowed heads and murmured broken sentences, and departed with a smile of peace. Finally there was but one person left, a woman, who knelt with bowed head and told over and over the beads of her rosary.

The father waited behind the curtains of crimson velvet—waited patiently, as was his manner. He noted the stillness of the evening and fanned himself a moment with his prayer book, and then fell to dreaming, while the shadows in the church were deeper and the stillness was unbroken. Then he heard the quick, nervous step, and softly rustling skirts of the last penitent approaching and bent his head to better catch her words as she knelt before him. In the strange, intense stillness, her words, although only faint whispers, sounded clear. He recognized her, though her black *rebosa* was pulled so far over her face that only the gleam of her eyes in a white face was seen. She was Donna Dolorosa, a saintly woman, who lived in the great hacienda outside the town, and who was famed for her piety and good works.

Father Anselmo, to whom all women were saints, had in his simple heart ranked her as the holiest of holies, and the poor of the town were made happy by her generosity, so the gold of her full and generous house had enriched the little chapel, and helped him in his works of charity. She had come to the town a few years before, a white-haired, sad-eyed woman, whose head was always bowed, and whose hands were always busy with sewing for the poor, making candles for the dead, cooking delicate

broths for the sick—meek, silent and pious, such was Donna Dolorosa, and many a blessing had the good father invoked for her. His assistant, Teodoro, whose eyes were younger and keener perhaps, frequently referred to her in terms of speculation, declaring that there were eyes which could flash in anger as well as with devotion and that those lips had not always worn that curve of meekness. But the older priest rebuked him severely and Donna was reverenced beyond all living women in his simple heart.

And now she was here at his confessional in a strangely agitated condition. Her white fingers clasped the prayer book and rosary so tightly that the mark looked black in the dim light and she was shivering as from a chill. The father had heard her confession before, simple sins enough, which she magnified in her great repentance and regret, and it had always brought joy to his soul to be able to dismiss her with the lightest penance and his blessing. But he had never seen her so strangely agitated. Perhaps it was the strange closeness in the atmosphere. He himself felt tired and strangely oppressed.

Just this afternoon he had been thinking of himself as growing old; for thirty years he had been in the parish. Babes whom he had baptized were bringing their children for first communion. Friends with whom he had dined and talked in the old days when he first came to Nueve Flores were dead and dust. A weakness had come upon him—a mood of retrospection; and he thought with a weary sigh, that when this, his last penitent was gone, he would go into the garden and rest by the little fountain and dream awhile.

So absorbed was he in his thoughts that he had listened mechanically to the words of the woman before him, and he came to himself with a start to realize that the words of the confessor were past and instead of the usual list of religious duties left undone, or fancied neglect of household tasks, the woman before him was pouring out a strange tale.

"Oh, my father! I could not help it. I have never before opened my heart. I thought the years would bring peace. I tried to buy tranquility by charity and good deeds, but it is useless, useless. I suffer—suffer until I must speak or go mad. If I had sent her soul to Hell, I could not suffer more—but she was so good, so devout—surely she is in Paradise with the Blessed Virgin these many years. Why, therefore, cannot I rest? But there is no peace—no rest—and I burn as though the infernal flames were lighted with my soul."

Her head bowed over and a low moan came from her lips, as a more violent shudder racked her slender frame.

Father Anselmo spoke quietly, as though to a child:

"Courage, my daughter! Courage! Thy pure soul can know nothing of the tortures of an evil heart. But if thou hast a secret sin upon thy conscience—confess—and peace shall come unto thee."

But she only shook her head and moaned again: "I cannot. I cannot."

Then the father said calmly: "I cannot help thee daughter, if thou

confess not. But why grievest thou? I, who have heard thy confession many times, know there are no great sins upon thy soul, and the poor call thee blessed."

"Yes," she cried eagerly, lifting her face. "I thought to ease the pain by gifts of gold and charity—but, 'twas of no avail. Ah, my father! 'tis not a sin of late years; 'tis an old, old sin, —and a sin so black that there is no atonement; no reparation on earth, nor in Heaven."

"Say not so," was the priest's reply, in tones of loving tenderness. "Save for the unpardonable sin, there is atonement for all—even for those who are wayward, the careless of speaking, the thief, the liar, even for those who kill—the murderer."

"Ah!" cried the woman in an agonized whisper, "that is my sin, dear and good father! I am that. I, even I."

The old priest sprang back in horror, but her hand reaching out wildly, caught his, and her thin fingers burned like fire.

"She has a fever," he said to himself; "this is delirium. Go my daughter! Return to thy house and rest, and I will come to you there, and thy confession can rest."

"No! No!" she cried. "I can rest nowhere and I swear I will not go hence until I have told it all. I do not rave, my father! Oh, believe me; I am sane—as nearly so as one on the edge of Hell can be. Listen now! I am calm and I will tell all. I pray you listen; send me not away."

The father seated himself again, thinking it best to humor her, and said gently, "Continue daughter!"

"It was long, long ago," she began. "We were friends, she and I. First in our childhood, then in the convent, and then in our girlhood, I loved her; but my love was not like hers. Our natures were so different. She would tell me lightly of her fancies and dreams, and would laugh and deride the cavaliers who came to serenade and make love—and there were many. I—I was too cold and proud to have many lovers, they said, but little did they know what feelings burned beneath my indifferent manners.

"But all men were alike to me until he came—and then—oh, my father! can you understand how one's eyes can watch a throng of people on fiesta, each one like unto another, and then suddenly one face gleams out; eyes look into yours and straightway you watch all faces eagerly, hoping to see that face again? So it was with me. And he, too, seemed to prefer me above all others, until he saw her. And she, like the wayward, laughing child she was, seemed to delight in teasing me about his evident preference for me. But I never revealed to her my feelings. And then, one night, Holy Mother! How the moon shone and the music sounded and the scent of the roses filled the air! I can shut my eyes and feel it all again, after fifty years.

"It was a grand ball, and I was happier that night. I have never been happy day nor night since, Father, and it was so long ago. They told me that night I had never been so beautiful, and he—he whispered compliments that—ah—I knew afterwards meant nothing, but then they

made my heart beat and my cheeks crimson.

"The contra dance was over and I was promenading with the governor's son, when I saw them together there by the fountain—in a quiet corner. His head was bent low over hers and as I watched, she raised her face and the moonlight shown full upon it—and then—he kissed her. I saw it, Father; and so did the governor's son, and he laughed a little and said, 'So the pretty Benicia has captivated our senior's cousin, and her stern duenna is—elsewhere,' and my blood, which had been dancing and singing in my veins, turned to ice. My heart has never been warm since, my father! I feel it here, a lump of ice!"

She pressed both hands on her bosom, but the priest, looking at her, with staring eyes, bade her quickly to go on, and she continued slowly:

"That night she was never so gay, never so lovely—her eyes shone like stars and her cheeks matched the roses at her breast and hair. But when she came in the rose was gone from her hair, and she caught my hands as she passed and whispered, 'Stay with me tonight. I have a secret to tell you.'"

"Stay!" said the priest in a faint voice. "This ball? Where was it? Who was thy friend?"

"It was long ago in Monterey. She was called Benicia Estudella. And he whom I loved, and whom I have never ceased loving, as, God forgive, I have never ceased hating her, was Ramon Ortega—a nephew of the governor."

The father passed his hand over his face, which was bathed in perspiration, and motioned for her to go on.

"That night I stayed at her house; and after all were asleep she crept into my bed and lying with her arms about my neck, she told me what I already knew—of the kiss in the garden and of her great happiness. I could have killed her then as she lay like a child in my arms, her soft lips, upon which his lips had so lately rested, pressed close to my cheek, her round white arms clasped about me. But I did not kill her then."

The woman at the confessional paused and in the silence a strange wind seemed to shake the church; the candle flames dipped, flickered, and burned bravely again, and the silence was broken by the clear young voice of the younger priest as he chanted the evening hymn in the oratory. And with a sigh, the woman resumed her story:

"I helped her prepare for the wedding. It was to be soon. I stood by them and watched their happy lovers' nonsense. Once, in gratitude for some little service, he said to her lightly: 'We must find a lover for our good Mercedes, Ninita!' Then I answered hotly, 'I want no lover.' He bent and kissed me lightly on the cheek saying, 'Thou hast in me a brother.' And I struck him full in the face with my hand and she sprang into his arms and kissed the crimson marks over and ever, while I bit my lip until it bled and turned away that I need not see them. Then there was a dreadful fever broke out in the city—a pestilence—and many died. Her father and lover took her out to the hills, far away, lest she be stricken,

for she was never very strong. They wanted me to go also, but I remained in the city. And I prayed, always, three prayers: first, that the fever might seize her and leave me Ramon; then that he might be taken so I would not have to give him up to her, and lastly, that I, myself, might die in order to be spared the sight of their happiness.

"But, though the fever increased and many died, we three were spared. Then my old nurse, my foster mother, was stricken with the fever and I became, because I had no fear, her nurse. Then, oh, my Father! there came my awful sin. I cannot, I cannot!"

A voice, strange and hard, came from the silent figure before the weeping woman: "I command thee—speak on—and quickly."

Sobbing, she went on: "I had laid away in a chest, a lace mantilla—of white silk lace it was—the finest web—and I also had the finest linen—and silk stockings. I took them all, and I placed them within the bed on which my foster mother lay, and they remained there until she died, and then I took them out—and—I went for a visit to the hills to where Benicia stayed.

"She welcomed me gladly—and was full of joy at my gifts. I dressed her in them all and she kissed me and called me 'Good, kind Mercedes.' But when she went down into the patio and I saw Ramon come up to her close—so close I feared for him and screamed wildly for him to go away. Then I fell in a fainting fit, and long after, when the stars were shining, I came to myself and found her by my bed, and the lace mantilla was still around her, and so she took the plague and died quickly. And her father was ill, but he did not die, and Ramon and I did not die.

"But he was a changed man, and never had eyes or words for any one after she died. Then he went away across the sea, to Spain, where they said he took the Orders and later died of a broken heart. I, becoming mistress of the estates of my uncle, have tried to live a pious life and buy salvation. But it is useless. I cannot find rest. I see her everywhere. I am haunted by her as she lay there dying, her face all disfigured; her lips swollen and black with fever and her pitiful cry for water, and for us to help her. I can hear her moaning yet: 'Ramon—Ramon!' The wind says it over and over, and the trees and the water—I can hear her everywhere."

As her head fell on her clasped hands, the old priest rose to his feet and cried:

"And I, too, hear it—as she cried on that last awful night—that poor murdered child!"

The eyes of the woman sought his in terror. "Who—who are you?" she stammered.

"I am Ramon," answered the priest in a strong voice. "I did not die, but she whom thou killed was dearer to me than life; and I would have given up mine gladly for hers. And thou, Mercedes, cometh to me with this confession and asketh me to intercede for forgiveness. By the Father above and all of his saints, I shall kill thee with my own hands."

He stepped down from the confes-

sional and seizing her arm he dragged her down the aisle toward the door, where she fell on her knees.

"Say thy prayers," he commanded. "Ask the Holy Mother to intercede for thee, for I cannot seek absolution for thee. My fair, pretty Benicia—so true—so loving—so gentle—how happy we should have been. And thou! to whom she was never aught but kind!"

Fifty years had passed since he had lived the tragedy of which she was confessing, and time, ever knitting up the torn bits of human lives until they all are whole again, had dealt kindly with his aching heart until the wounds had healed and their scars ceased to throb. But, now, he had gone back to that long ago, that almost forgotten time, and was again the heartbroken, passionate youth, whose sorrow for his lost love seemed too great to be borne. His mild blue eyes were dark with blazing anger, his wrinkled face flamed with wrath, and his bowed shoulders were straight and young, as he towered above the cowering woman. For years he had been a priest, holy, gentle and forgiving, but now, for the moment, he was an angry, avenging man. Anger lent strength to his arm and seizing the crucifix from the wall, he lifted it high in the air as though to strike the creature, who fell on her knees before him.

"No, no, Ramon," she cried wildly. "Spare me! Do not take my wretched life! Take not upon thyself the curse which has tortured me. Forgive me, and let me die in peace," and raising her clasped hands toward heaven she implored, "Merciful God, let him not do this deed! Holy Virgin, save him! O, hear me! Hear me! Mother of Sorrow—help!"

Even as the despairing words rang through the church, the building seemed to shiver and shake, the stone pavement to lift itself, and the white marble angel which held the font of holy water trembled and pitched forward, striking with the tip of its wing, the forehead of the kneeling woman, and she fell forward with the holy water drenching her white hair.

And the threatening arm of Father Anselmo shook and the crucifix dropped from his grasp, as the young priest ran in crying:

"Come outside, outside! It is *Eltremble!*" an earthquake!

But the old priest could not speak, and the woman was dead.

And Father Anselmo changed after the night of the earthquake into another person. His right arm and side were paralyzed and he spoke no word, but lay like one already dead, on his couch, and tenderly cared for by his younger companion.

One evening, just at sunset, when the crimson and gold flamed in the west and the cool air came from the hills, Teodoro sat by his side in the garden. A little child had brought him roses and Teodoro had placed them in his helpless hand and the old man lay watching them. Presently the tears began to steal slowly down his wrinkled old cheeks; his lips moved, and he said in a faint whisper: "Go in peace, Mercedes, I have forgiven thee!" and then, as his comrade stared in amazement, the old priest, helpless for many weeks, raised him-

self from the pillow, and staring out into the golden clouds of the sunset for a moment, held out his arms and cried in a glad, happy voice: "Benicia!"

Then the Angelus rang out and he fell back, with the roses scattered across his silent form, and a glorified light illumined his face. The soul of father Anselmo was at rest.

The look of happiness did not leave him and those who came to look upon him marveled at the radiance of his countenance.

An Adventure in Darkness

BY LILLIAN STOCKTON ALLEN

IN the early part of August, about eleven years ago, a certain hotel at a summer resort in Pennsylvania, well known for the quality of its clientele and for its high class service, suddenly became deserted, dismissed its help and closed its doors. This remarkable conduct on the part of the proprietors occasioned no little curiosity and comment, and though there were, at the time, rumors and whispers as to the reasons why apparently satisfied guests should over night decide to pack up and leave, and why in the midst of a lucrative season the hotel should be boarded up, the real causes have never been disclosed. Only three persons knew all the facts—my wife, my sister, and myself. The others knew perhaps more, perhaps less. What they had heard and suspected the women were too timid to repeat and the men too much in fear of ridicule to sponsor. The owners of the house never tried to reopen it, but abandoned it and started in business in another town.

Three years ago it burned down to the foundations; in the passing of years both proprietors died, so there is now no reason why, with my sister's permission, I should not tell a highly interesting story.

When I graduated from the University Medical School, I started practising in Philadelphia, living with my only sister, who was dependent on me. Fate was kind and I prospered, and in the summer of 1904 we decided that we could afford a real vacation. So I sent Helen up to the Hotel Agonda about the middle of July, intending to join her in August. About a week later I received the first of the following letters.

Hotel Agonda, Lake Wiscasset,
July 19, 1904.

Dr. James D. Wayne
2525 Boulevard
Philadelphia, Pa.

Dear Jimmie-boy:—

This delightful place, with its bracing atmosphere and pleasant temperature, has made me feel so full of ambition and energy that I could move mountains! The books you sent were here when I arrived, and I expect to spend many happy hours either on the lake or in the woods with them. Thanks, Buddy.

I have met only a few people as yet, and they are not of the younger set, but everybody here looks nice and perhaps interesting, and you know what that means to me, when you cast your eyes over my list of stodgy respectabilities at home. I take my swim every morning and a walk every afternoon, and so far have gone to bed early every night. All this means that I am feeling very fit. I know you will be crazy over this place, and hope nothing will happen to prevent your trip in August.

Lots of love—let me hear how you are getting on.

Helen.

Incidentally, Helen has since met someone whom she did not consider stodgy and she married him. The next letter I got was even more enthusiastic.

Dear Jimmie-boy:—

Since my last letter to you I have met nearly all the people here, and find them very jolly and attractive. They have been kind enough to include me in their little parties and I am having a splendid time. We swim, boat, picnic, and dance together like one big family, everyone is so goodnatured and friendly. Do come up soon. I am sure it will do you a world of good.

There is another woman here all alone, a Mrs. Hunt, whom I find very interesting. She does not join our parties for she does not care for out-door sports, and is rarely seen during the day, but in the evening she appears in the most *gorgeous* clothes! Dancing is the only form of recreation in which she indulges, and it is a pleasure to watch her. She is quite unusual; indeed that is the first impression one gets—that she is utterly different. The rest of the people here are cultured and refined, but Mrs. Hunt is more; she has intellect added to a wide experience, a fine discriminative power, and a wonderfully fascinating personality. I see a good deal of her, and I think she has taken a fancy to me, for she comes over to my table nearly every night after dinner and we spend the evening together either on her balcony or mine, if I am not dancing. Her conversation is stimulating, always full of new ideas and clever observations, and I am profiting by her friendship. A person like that is very developing, don't you think so? Well, come soon and you shall see.

Affectionately,
Helen.

Dear Brother:—

The papers tell me of the intense heat you are having in town. Days pass here in such cool temperate succession that we can hardly realize the few hours that separate us from all that discomfort and suffering. In spite of the fine weather here I am not feeling as chipper as I was at first. I don't know what the matter is, but I get up in the morning feeling weary, and can't seem to get back my tone all day. Now don't tell me that I have been leading too strenuous a life, because I haven't. Every evening for the past week I have spent with Mrs. Hunt, and have turned in about ten-thirty. Her room is next to mine and our balconies adjoin, and as I don't see her during the day, I keep my evenings for her.

She suffers from a peculiar nervous disease which, for her, reverses the natural order of things. She never plans nor attempts anything in the daytime, feeling utterly unfit, but stays in a darkened room till evening, when she begins to feel like herself again. All her social life, travelling, etc., occurs at night, and how anyone under such disadvantages can have seen so much and met so many people is a wonder to me. I told her to ask you about her condition; perhaps you might be able to help her, but she said that she had been to specialists all over the world and that there is no cure for her because her ailment is hereditary; her mother was affected in a like manner.

At any rate, there is nothing hereditary in my trouble just now. I don't sleep well, and when you come up I am going to get you to fix me up.

It has been worth my trip here to meet Mrs. Hunt—she is by far the most worth while person I have ever known. We must have her visit us this winter. When you are sure just when you are coming, let me know a day or two in advance and I will arrange for your room. Until then, adios.

Affectionately,
Helen.

Jim Dear:—

I can't write much of a letter, because I feel so miserable. I wrote you that I am not sleeping well. That is not just it—I sleep, but I have been having the most awful smothering dreams every night for nearly a week, and the result is that I am a nervous wreck. If you are not coming soon I shall come home. I don't want to be here by myself any longer. Mrs. Hunt has been kindness itself, but I want to come home if I am sick, and I think I am. Let me hear from you on receipt of this. Love— Helen.

The foregoing letter made me very anxious. There seemed to be something unexplained in my usually healthy and unimaginative sister's nervousness. On thinking the matter over, I decided to start on my vacation at once. Picking up the telephone I called Miss Ridgeway, one of my best nurses:

"Can you leave this afternoon with me on a case? I may need you a week and I may not need you at all, but I want you to be there."

"Certainly," she answered, like the good soldier that she was.

"All right, we'll leave on the two o'clock train," I replied.

On the three-hour journey to Lake Wiscasset, I explained to Miss Ridgeway why I had called her so suddenly. Being well acquainted with Helen, she listened with surprise:

"It looks like nervous breakdown, doesn't it?" she said, "but Helen was never subject to nerves."

"No, neither is she given to worrying about herself," I replied. "However, there is no use making a diagnosis until I have seen her."

When we arrived, neither of us was prepared for the change in the poor child. So white and drawn and listless, so different from the blooming girl who had left home a few short weeks before, that I hardly knew my little sister. She seemed glad to see me out of all proportion to the length of our separation. After arranging with the management for a room for Miss Ridgeway next to Helen's, I went right to her room and looked her over. Besides a very weak pulse, and her account of her nervous disturbances, I could find nothing the matter with her, and yet it was ridiculous, in the face of her changed appearance and the short time in which it had occurred, to ascribe it to an ordinary run-down condition.

"Tell me about your dreams," I said.

"Well, they are all the same in effect," she answered. "They differ only in details. I either dream that I am drowning, or that I am buried alive, or that someone is holding a pillow over my face. In every dream there is that terrible fight for breath. I know I am silly and overwrought, but once I became almost conscious during the struggle, and afterwards I could have sworn that there was someone in the room who was responsible for my plight. It was that, I think, that made me so frightened. Of course I know it is foolish."

"Of course," I agreed, as I sniffed around all the gas fixtures to make sure that there were no leaks. Then I wrote her out a prescription for a sedative, and assuming my best professionally cheerful manner said, "Let a bellboy take this to the nearest drugstore, and take one as soon as you get it and another when you go to bed. I'll join you in twenty minutes in the dining room."

The hum characteristic of a large hotel dining room, where a majority of the people have had a chance to get acquainted, had already set in when I joined the two girls. Helen seemed to have recovered some of her spirits and was more animated than she had been in the afternoon, and the conversation turned principally on the plans to be made for the coming week. In the midst of them I was conscious of a slight hushing of the steady buzz around us, and a turning of heads toward the door. Answering the impulse, I also, turned and saw, sweeping toward a table on the other side, a striking looking woman. She was tall, dark, and very handsomely gowned in something black and close, and around her shoulders there hung a scarf of some curious weave sparkling with brilliants. There seemed in her bearing, however, to be a certain aloofness, even an atmosphere of coldness, which repelled me in spite of her undoubted beauty.

"That is Mrs. Hunt," said Helen.

"Sort of proud and 'aughty, isn't she?" I asked.

"Oh, no, not at all," said Helen loyally. "She does not know many people here."

Later, as I sat under the trees in the soft still night and listened to Mrs. Hunt's well modulated voice, I wondered why it was that she did not attract me more strongly for, as Helen said, she was a good, even a brilliant converser, and was certainly very stunning to look at. I decided that I must be growing less susceptible with age.

At ten o'clock I sent Helen to her room, and gave Miss Ridgeway some instructions. "See that she takes her powders and look in on her from time to time during the night. If anything happens call me; I shall be in the room directly over you." Thereupon I went to my room and was asleep almost as soon as my head touched the pillow. It must have been about five o'clock when I was aroused by a tapping at the door. Jumping out of bed I opened it; there stood Miss Ridgeway in her dressing gown.

"Come right down," she said. "I think Helen is unconscious."

She proved to be right. Helen was lying in a stupor, with lips blue and pulse subnormal, her respiration was very slight, and she had every appearance of a person suffering from shock.

"When did you notice the first evidence of this condition?" I asked the nurse.

"Just before I called you," she replied. "I have been in and out all night every couple of hours, and the last time she was sleeping easily and breathing normally. At five, when I made my last inspection, I found her in this state and notified you at once."

As I took Helen's left hand in my own to take her pulse, my eye was attracted for the first time to a small bluish mark. It looked as though it might have been made by a jab from a hypodermic needle, except that it was a little larger than such a mark would be, and fresh. There was no trace of anything that could have made the puncture, and no drop or smear of blood on her gown or coverlet.

"Do you know anything about this?" I asked Miss Ridgeway.

"No," she said, examining it with surprise. "I had not noticed it before."

"Well, the first thing to do is to give her a stimulant, then when she is herself again, treat the incident as if it had not occurred. We must keep her from any chance of hysteria. Tonight I shall watch her myself."

Soon Helen began to draw long shuddering breaths, and though her face continued to be bloodless, the blue tint left her lips and finally she opened her eyes. The terror in them faded when she met mine and I gave her hand a grip.

"Another dream," she murmured and closed them again.

All that day we kept Helen quiet, sitting on the narrow balcony on which the French windows opened from her room facing the lake. Mrs. Hunt's balcony, which was separated from ours by a two-foot stone balustrade, was deserted, the windows closed and the shades drawn.

"We've been sitting here almost every night," said Helen. "It is so easy to slip over the rail and so absolutely private."

"Will not our reading disturb your friend?" inquired Miss Ridgeway.

"I think not; she says she never hears noises during the day."

So throughout the day we remained on the balcony, lunching, reading, chatting, napping. At dinner time Helen said she felt strong enough to go down, and thinking it might be conducive to a good night's sleep, I permitted her to accompany us to the dining room.

Mrs. Hunt was there before us, looking very distinguished in a soft dusky gray gown, and the same curiously sparkling scarf of the night before.

"That scarf is the envy of every woman here," said Helen. "Mrs Hunt must be very much attached to it or she is afraid someone will kidnap it, for I have never seen her without it."

It was, indeed, the one ultimate touch necessary to emphasize the keynote of dark beauty of its possessor. Its brilliance contrasted with her tawny skin and the midnight of her hair, as the stars accentuate the velvet blackness of the heavens, and as she commiserated my sister on her ill health, I could not but note the further contrast between the absolute glowing health of this exotic woman and the anæmic weakness evident in Helen's pale face and listless attitude. She seemed genuinely concerned over Helen's condition, and remained with us during the evening. Yet, in spite of her friendliness, she seemed to me to be separated from us completely by a strain in her personality that hung like an invisible asbestos curtain between our spirits and hers, shutting out all warmth and human touch. I confessed to myself that I did not like her, and began to look around for some tangible reason to explain it. This I found, in a feeble way, when I accompanied my sister to her room and idly picked up a couple of books from the table by her bedside. Oscar Wilde's, "The Picture of Dorian Grey," and De Maupassant's "The Horla."

"Fine bedtime stuff for a nervous woman," I said. "I don't wonder you have dreams if this is what you have been reading. Where did you get them? I didn't send them to you."

"They are Mrs. Hunt's."

"Look here, what do you know about her? You oughtn't to get so awfully intimate with an unknown woman you pick up in a summer hotel. Who is she? Where does she come from? Where is her husband? You say she knows no one here; I'll bet no one here knows her!"

"Jim! how can you talk so! She knows everybody of any importance all over the world. She can tell intimate stories of great persons of every capital of Europe, and tells them with a personal detail that would be impossible to one who had not been associated with them closely; she could not have just picked it up. No adventuress could have gotten so close to all of them."

"Any experienced ladies' maid could," I said maliciously.

"Don't be silly! Ladies' maids don't read books like that."

"Ladies don't, you mean," I said, perhaps a little unfairly, walking out of the room with the books.

That was at ten o'clock; at eleven-thirty I knocked at Miss Ridgeway's door and was told that Helen was sleeping quietly.

"I am going in now," I said; "will be there all night. The door will be left unlocked and if you hear anything I want you to come right in."

"All right, doctor," she answered.

Slipping quietly into the next room, I made my way to a large easy chair which I had previously placed in a corner, slightly turned so that I could get a complete view of the room without being conspicuous myself. The French windows were open and a strip of white moonlight lay across the floor, making my corner doubly dark. Settling myself comfortably, my vigil started. At twelve the dance orchestra folded their strings and silently stole to wherever such musical Arabs steal; the gay little groups disintegrated; one by one the noises were hushed, and silence reigned.

A long time I sat, physically relaxed, but mentally alert, listening to my sister's regular breathing. I took my Colt from my hip pocket—and replaced it, smiling at myself for my own heroics, and wondering whether a man ever gets over his Jesse James proclivities. I was going over in retrospect, the days of my boyhood, when my ear caught a swishing sound, and I glanced toward the window whence it came. A shadow appeared in the moonlight and a woman's figure glided noiselessly into the room; as it crossed the path of the moon, something clinging about her shoulders glittered curiously in the light. She stood and listened a moment, then apparently assured by the stillness, she made her way to the bed and bent over Helen. I could not determine what she was doing at first, but in a few minutes I saw that her mouth was directly over Helen's and she seemed to be inhaling deeply. There was a little struggle on Helen's part, —perhaps there had been more—but she was now too weak to make much resistance. She merely turned her face but was followed at once by that sucking mouth, and in a shorter time than it takes to tell it, her breathing had almost ceased. Then the woman took Helen's hand, which was lying outside the cover, and raised the scarred wrist to her lips. At this point I pushed my chair violently around and stood up.

"Just a moment, please."

Quick as a flash she wheeled, and I found myself looking into the barrel of a revolver.

"Two can do that," I said, reaching for mine. As I did so a bullet crashed over my shoulder into the wall behind me. Without further delay I fired, aiming at the upraised white arm. Somehow, as I fired, she moved and the ball struck the back of her neck. She made a gesture as though to reach for the place, lifting both arms, and the scarf fell in a heavy glittering heap at her feet. At that moment, a peculiar metamorphosis took place. As I switched on the electric light the door opened and Miss Ridgeway entered, surveyed the scene, and promptly fainted. There on the floor before us, twitching spasmodically, lay a gigantic bat.

The Buccaneers

BY CHART PITT

THE silver song of sleigh-bells came to Rodski, as he crouched among the stunted willows at the side of the trail. The fur coat fitted like a skin upon his massive, hunched figure. A few paces away he might have been taken for a bear.

A sinister smile hovered about his bearded lips, as he thought of the voyager who drew nearer across the snows. The smile broadened into a grin, in which crooked, yellow fangs gleamed in the dull light, like the broken fangs of an old wolf.

He smiled for his heart was filled with the memory of other voyagers whose silvery bells had broken the silence of the northern wastes.

He knew the wolf-pack was near—his pack that he had mothered since they were woolly pups. The training of the first six pups he had found in a den beside the river, had been discouraging, bitter work. But after that, each pup he gathered from the wilderness was a willing student when he was turned out with the pack.

Since the day he sent the first six wolves from the stunted willows, many travellers who had taken that northern trail had failed to return. Their sleighs had been loaded with priceless things from the settlement—things that had gone to gladden the home of Rodski among the blackened rocks of his cave.

So Rodski placed a bit of metal to his lips, and the silvery note of a whistle fluttered across the frozen tundra, and blended with the song of the bells.

At the sound, a troop of shadowy forms that had been crouching among the willows, sprang suddenly into life. They, too, had heard the song of the bells, and were waiting for the signal that should call them to the feast.

Together they waited, while the bells drew nearer—the fur-clad man who hunched up like an animal and fattened his vampire soul in the trail-wreckage—and the hungry wolf-pack, with the fires of battle burning in their mad eyes.

Then before them the voyager loomed up in the night-light, a shadowy blotch that slipped swiftly across the white plain.

Just then the silvery whistle sounded the "charge," and the swiftness of the journeying sledge was laughed to scorn, by the leaping, snarling swiftness of the mad pack.

Rodski ventured from the willows while the death-song of the wolves was at its height. He began to run along the blood-flecked trail, wabbling on his short legs, in his haste to reach the spot where the wreckage would be scattered, when his wolves had grown weary of the feast.

He heard the mad cry of the driver, that urged the horses across the snow, in the grip of that world-old fear of the wild.

He heard the cry of the pack grow faint in the distance, and hurried on to the place where the wolf-feast would be spread—to gather the wreckage of the battle from the crimson, trampled snow.

Then the tinkle of other bells came across the northern night. The wild aurora sprang into silvery birth above the pole, and flooded the snow-drifts with its ghastly, leaping light.

For a moment Rodski trembled in the grip of guilty fear. He sprang away from the trail, to hide his huge body among the friendly drifts.

But the greed that had sent him out into the wastes to be a brother of the wolf-pack, clamored within him, at the thought of the precious cargo that was slipping out of his grasp.

Back to the trail he floundered. As the bells drew nearer, and the blotch of the sleigh broke out of the shadows, he drew himself up proudly, like an honest man waiting for a ride.

He tried to drown the excitement in his voice as he accosted the voyager: "Could you help me along for a few miles, I am tired out?"

The voyager reined in his animals, and the man with the vampire-heart leaped into the sleigh, and they reeled away across the white plain.

A lurch of the sledge caused the driver to reel in his seat. At that moment a heavy knife came down, grazed his shoulder, and snapped its blade off in the wood of the seat.

Then the two men grappled in the swaying sledge—fighting blindly for their lives, as beasts fight. The sound of their battling sent, the animals snorting away at a mad pace.

With a wild, inhuman laugh, the iron fingers of the wolf-man closed over the throat of the voyager. The dizzy reel of the sledge grew wilder and madder every minute, but the wolf-man gloated among the rich furs, as he felt the form of his victim grow limp beneath his hands.

When he threw the lifeless body into the drifts at the road-side, the wolf-man clutched the reins, in a vain effort to stay their mad rush.

In that moment he heard the wolf-pack returning, with the death-song yet upon their lips. The sinister sound rang full-throated and heartless, over the wild medley of the bells.

In the grip of a dumb fear, Rodski reached for the silver whistle to sound the "retreat" that would send the clamoring pack back to the shelter of the stunted willows.

Then the man who had fattened upon the wreckage of other travelers, himself felt that master-grief of the wastelands eating into his heart—the chain swung empty from his neck. The precious whistle had been lost in the fight.

Madly he searched among the priceless furs at his feet, tossing out the rich robes in his mad quest for a bit of polished metal—something that would shield him from the terror of the snows.

At last he raised himself from the search. He was beaten for the moment, but he was ready to leap from the racing sledge. The iron heart that had stifled his homesick longings for the southern roses, and had held him a silent-mouthed exile among the lonely marshes, would not let him die without a struggle.

He knew it would be a crippled man that landed among the drifts of the road-side—he could hope for nothing better than that.

Then, at least, he might creep away into the night, to die in the grip of the numbing cold—anything but the death that menaced him in the foam-flecked, rending jaws of the wolf-pack.

Then as if to mock his resolution, he saw the dim-drawn line of the pack—an unbroken circle that raced into the night—a circle that drew closer and closer each minute.

He shouted to them—words that would have sent them cringing with fear at any other time. But his voice sounded strange and hollow, amid the din of the pack and the medley of the bells.

As Rodski heard the hollow echoes of his voice go calling and calling across the night-bound marshes, he knew there could be but one ending to that wild ride.

The pack was mad with the memory of the other fight, a deadly circle that drew closer and closer about the hapless victims, as their forefathers had circled and feasted through the numberless years that had gone.

With the shadow of death upon him, Rodski lived in the memory of other days—days when the lure of the wastes was gnawing deep into his heart.

Once more he was pitted against the things of the wild—before he became a brother of the wolf. He could feel once more the hollow mockery of the white miles—miles that were cursed with the death-song of the wolf.

He saw the blue light of the aurora go leaping across the white dunes, and he sent his mad laugh ringing into the gray smother of the arctic night, as he waited for the fight.

The voyagers had always fought with the desperation of death upon them—but not as this iron-thewed maniac fought.

For a moment they drew back, as the madman's laugh challenged them to battle. Then they closed in upon him.

He could feel the blue fires of hate burning in their wild eyes—feel their hot breath upon his face. But the sting of their rending jaws was lost in the madness of the fight.

The sledge lurched drunkenly as the horses went down and the song of the bells called no more across the frozen marshes.

The trampled snow grew slippery with the red wreckage of the fight. The stars went out in the numbing blindness that was creeping over the mangled form of the wolf-man.

Blindly he groped in the awful blackness—and found only the gnashing jaws of the buccaneers of the wild.

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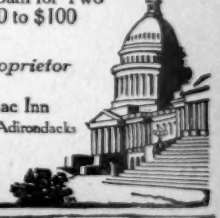

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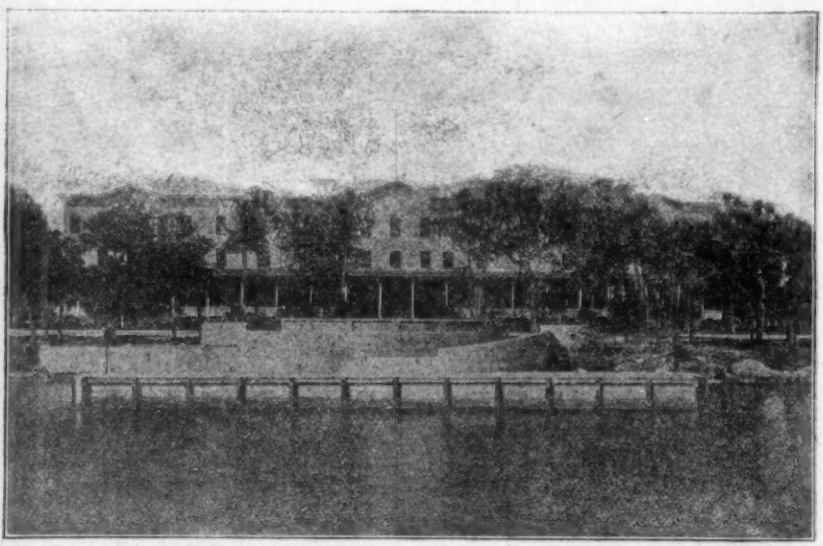

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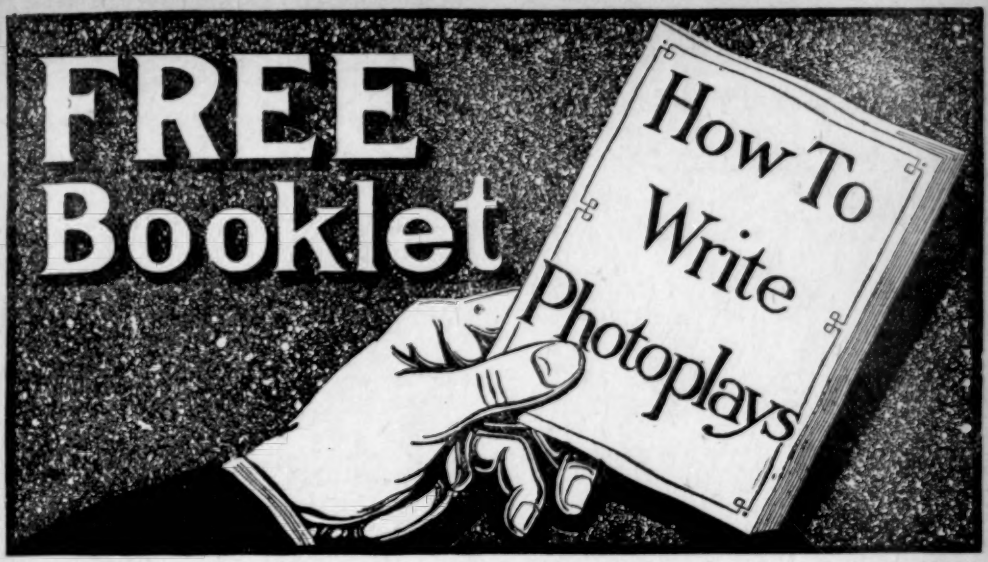

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